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The Decision-Making Process of Finding Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities Eligible for Participation in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by
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Abstract

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF FINDING STUDENTS WITH SIGNIFICANT INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES ELIGIBLE FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE VIRGINIA ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

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The purpose of this study was to understand the decision-making process used by IEP teams and case managers for students with significant intellectual disabilities who participate in alternate assessments based on aligned academic achievement standards (AA-AAS). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with case managers for students participating in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) from school divisions in central Virginia. Traditional inductive data analysis techniques were used to analyze data collected from the in-depth interviews, the researcher's reflexive field notes and observations, and a review of VAAP training and guidance documents provided by study participants. Findings illuminated the decision-

making process of finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in the VAAP and resulted in a visual representation of the decision-making process.

Keywords: alternate assessment, intellectual disabilities, decision-making, qualitative

Chapter 1: Introduction

Alternate assessments for students with significant intellectual disabilities were first mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 97). As a result, these students were included in high stakes assessment accountability systems for the first time. Alternate assessments have continued to evolve since then, accelerated in particular by passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Alternate assessments are currently based on general education academic content standards. Students taking these tests are assessed in the same academic content areas as their nondisabled peers. However, the academic content standards for students with significant intellectual disabilities have been reduced in complexity (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2005). These *alternate academic content standards* are intended to address all domains within the grade-level content areas of reading, math, and science, but they do not necessitate the depth or breadth of knowledge required of students in the general curriculum. The USDOE has also placed a 1% cap on the number of proficient alternate assessment scores earned by students with significant intellectual disabilities that may be included in Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) calculations. To differentiate early alternate assessments from current assessments, the latter have become known as alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS).

Statement of the Problem

AA-AAS are intended to assess the academic achievement of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities, representing about 1% of the total student population. Students are considered to be *appropriate participants* in AA-AAS if they (a) have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or one is being developed; (b) have an intellectual disability; (c) require instruction in multiple settings or in multiple ways to generalize their learning; and (d) participate in a curriculum that includes functional skills (Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, & Kleinert, 2009). IEP teams identify students with significant intellectual disabilities as appropriate participants in AA-AAS, deeming AA-AAS a suitable way to assess these students' academic achievement. On the surface, it may appear easy to identify students with the most significant intellectual disabilities, for whom AA-AAS are intended. This is not the case, however, because the participation criteria are much broader than a student's IQ score.

Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, Kleinert, and Thomas (2011) and Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al. (2009) investigated the learner characteristics of students with significant intellectual disabilities participating in AA-AAS across several states. Students were reported to possess a wide range of abilities and characteristics in reading and math skills, levels of symbolic communication, levels of engagement in social interactions, and physical, vision, and hearing impairments (Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al., 2009). The heterogeneous nature of the abilities and characteristics of students with significant intellectual disabilities makes it difficult to identify students as appropriate participants in AA-AAS because there are no cut scores

or formulas for definitively identifying the student with a significant intellectual disability. Also, school divisions may be using other criteria to decide participation.

NCLB and IDEA legislation offer only general guidance to states for identifying students with the most significant disabilities who may participate in AA-AAS. In turn, state education agencies (SEAs) provide IEP teams with general participation criteria for identifying students for participation in AA-AAS. For example, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provides the following participation criteria to determine student eligibility for participation in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). The student

- must have a current IEP or one that is being developed;
- must demonstrate significant cognitive disabilities;
- must have a present level of performance that indicates the need for extensive, direct instruction and/or intervention in a curriculum based on ASOLs [Aligned Standards of Learning]. The present level of performance or student evaluation may also include personal management, recreation and leisure, school and community, vocational, communication, social competence, and/or motor skills;
- [must require] intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction in a variety of settings to show interaction and achievement; and
- [must be] working toward educational goals other than those prescribed for a Modified Standard Diploma, Standard Diploma, or Advanced Studies Diploma (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2011a).

The IEP team is responsible for making participation decisions for students who are candidates for VAAP using the Participation Criteria Form included in Appendix A

(VDOE, 2011a). VDOE (2009) also publishes a guidance document for identifying students with significant intellectual disabilities, but the agency only suggests IEP teams use the document when discussing a student's eligibility for VAAP participation.

VDOE monitors the VAAP participation rates of local education agencies (LEAs) in the Commonwealth. VDOE also provides technical assistance to LEAs with VAAP proficiency rates above 1% to ensure better understanding and application of VAAP participation criteria to individual students. However, VDOE does not audit how LEAs and their IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria. It is not known if other SEAs audit the application of AA-AAS participation criteria in their respective LEAs. This means that, at least in Virginia, state level educational leaders do not know about the decision-making processes being used by local IEP teams to find students with disabilities eligible to participate in AA-AAS. It is also significant to note that research into how IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria appears absent from the body of knowledge of AA-AAS.

The varied learner characteristics of students with significant intellectual disabilities and the general guidance from federal and state education agencies make it difficult for IEP teams to consistently and confidently interpret and apply the participation criteria to identify students appropriate for AA-AAS. Misidentifying students as participants in AA-AAS can have profound effects for students, such as: reduced educational instruction, limited educational expectations, and poor post-secondary outcomes. The technical quality of AA-AAS can be jeopardized when students without significant intellectual disabilities participate. The validity and reliability of the assessment instrument comes under question, thereby invalidating the scores of all

students taking AA-AAS and rendering the assessment unreliable for measuring the academic achievement of students with significant intellectual disabilities. Assessment drives instruction. AA-AAS assess student achievement on academic content standards reduced in depth and complexity, resulting in instruction that is also reduced in depth and complexity. This practice means students participating in AA-AAS do not receive instruction on the same level as their non-disabled peers. Although this practice may be fitting for students with significant intellectual disabilities, students who do not truly possess significant intellectual disabilities but who are relegated to participate in AA-AAS will not receive appropriate instruction and, thus, may become the victims of low educational expectations and poor post-secondary outcomes. Misidentifying a student for participation in an AA-AAS can result in a student being denied a free appropriate public education (FAPE) as required under IDEA.

Three levels of the problem are exemplified. First, the heterogeneous characteristics of students with significant intellectual disabilities (Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al., 2009) make it difficult to identify students as appropriate participants in AA-AAS. Second, the AA-AAS participation criteria provided by the USDOE and SEAs are general in nature, as described above, again making it difficult to consistently and accurately identify students with significant intellectual disabilities as participants in AA-AAS. Finally, there appears to be a lack of research on the decision-making process used by IEP teams to find students eligible to take AA-AAS. This part of the problem will be discussed at greater length in chapter 2.

Rationale for Study of the Problem

Ensuring that IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria accurately and consistently, thereby allowing only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities to take AA-AAS, is essential to FAPE for all students with disabilities. Students who do not truly exhibit significant intellectual disabilities, but are relegated to taking AA-AAS, are denied FAPE because their educational instruction and expectations are diminished. Students who truly have significant intellectual disabilities are affected when higher functioning students take AA-AAS because the technical quality of the assessment is compromised. AA-AAS cut scores and proficiency scores are artificially inflated when students with less significant intellectual disabilities participate in the assessment. Such a practice decreases the sensitivity of the AA-AAS, thereby rendering the assessment tool incapable of accurately depicting the academic achievement of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities. Understanding how IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria is an important step to ensuring that only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities take these specialized assessments.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the decision-making process whereby IEP teams determine a student's eligibility to participate in AA-AAS. Previous research in the field of AA-AAS has been descriptive (Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagel, 2006), focused on technical quality and validity (Elliott & Roach, 2007a, 2007b; Flowers, Browder, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006; Kettler et al., 2010; Marion & Pellegrino, 2006; Roach, Elliott, & Webb, 2005; Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Kohprasert, Baker, & Courtade, 2008), or

addressed learner characteristics of students participating in AA-AAS (Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al., 2009). However, research investigating the decision-making process for finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in AA-AAS appears absent from the literature.

Research Background

While study of the AA-AAS participation decision-making process appears absent from the research literature, extensive research into other aspects of AA-AAS provides important background information to support this study.

Roach (2005) discusses the importance of developing meaningful AA-AAS eligibility participation criteria. A close examination of federal and state AA-AAS participation guidelines illustrates that these governing agencies provide only general guidance to IEP teams for finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in AA-AAS. Virginia's participation criteria for the VAAP are no exception.

Research into the learner characteristics of students with significant intellectual disabilities who take AA-AAS has revealed a heterogeneous group of students with a wide range of abilities and learning issues (Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al., 2009). Since students with the most significant intellectual disabilities are so different from each other, it is difficult to pinpoint the ultimate set of AA-AAS participation criteria. Understanding the learner characteristics of students with significant intellectual disabilities is important to understanding how IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria as they seek to decide who should take these tests.

As mentioned earlier, USDOE places a 1% cap on the number of proficient AA-AAS scores that may be included in AYP calculations. From a school accountability

standpoint, this limitation on the inclusion of AA-AAS scores in AYP calculations makes it important for school divisions to ensure that only the appropriate students are taking AA-AAS. The percentage of proficient VAAP scores included in school division-level AYP calculations has varied widely across school divisions since 2003; between 0.22% and 4.17% (VDOE Office of Educational Information Management, personal communication, February 20, 2010). When this percentage of proficient VAAP scores goes significantly above the 1% cap required under NCLB, concerns of misidentification and over-identification of AA-AAS participants arise. It does not benefit LEAs when local schools misidentify AA-AAS participants, nor does it benefit students.

Over the past several years, five states have requested exemptions to the 1% cap imposed by NCLB, including Virginia. While a few states received relief from the 1% cap, all states requesting exemptions were admonished to ensure that only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities participated in their respective AA-AAS (USDOE, n.d.). This action by federal officials demonstrates USDOE's commitment to ensuring that only the appropriate students take AA-AAS.

Although it is difficult to identify students with the most significant intellectual disabilities who should participate in AA-AAS, it is important to ensure that only appropriate students take these specialized assessments. Understanding how case managers and IEP teams apply their states' AA-AAS participation criteria can inform the decision-making process. It can also help improve educational policy that guides the development and application of AA-AAS participation criteria.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Who are the primary decision-makers for determining a student's participation in VAAP?
2. What formal policies and informal practices inform the decision-making process?
3. How do these formal policies and informal practices influence the decision-making process?
4. What other factors influence the decision-making process?
5. Could the decision-making process be improved upon? How and why?

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used to answer the above research questions. In this descriptive interview study the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with case managers of students participating in the VAAP to help bring understanding to the VAAP participation decision-making process. The researcher used reflexive field notes and VAAP training and/or guidance documents obtained from study participants to triangulate data from the in-depth interviews.

Participants were drawn from school divisions in central Virginia with the highest VAAP participation rates. It was anticipated that case managers from school divisions with the highest VAAP participation rates would be the richest sources of information about issues surrounding the VAAP decision-making process. Permission was gained, first from division superintendents, and then from the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once permission was received to proceed with the study, the researcher contacted school division representatives and had them distribute an introductory email to potential participants to issue an invitation to

participate in the study. Case managers of students participating in the VAAP who were interested in participating in the study replied to the recruitment email and were accepted as participants in the study. Thirteen participants were drawn from elementary, middle, and high schools, representing rural, suburban, and urban communities in central Virginia. Two phases of recruitment were necessary to produce a sufficient number of participants.

Data were interpreted and synthesized using traditional qualitative inductive reasoning techniques. The researcher immersed herself in the data, looked for emerging themes, and triangulated findings with reflexive field notes and document review. TAMSAalyzer (TAMS), a Macintosh-based qualitative data analysis software program, was used to facilitate data analysis. The research questions foreshadowed preliminary themes. However, the researcher was open to and identified other themes that presented themselves during the data analysis phase.

Summary

Although students with the most significant intellectual disabilities make up about 1% of the total student population, AA-AAS must have the same level of technical quality required for assessments designed to measure the academic achievement of students in the general curriculum. One issue that plagues AA-AAS is the difficulty associated with accurately and consistently identifying the appropriate students to participate in these specialized assessments. Research studies and federal and state documents exemplify these difficulties and underscore the need to better understand how IEP teams apply LEA AA-AAS participation guidelines. This study explored the AA-AAS participation decision-making process with Virginia educators who serve as

case managers of students participating in the VAAP. The qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to explore the decision-making process from the case manager's perspective in a unique way. The findings from this study produced valuable insight into the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process. These findings also served as a foundation for future study into AA-AAS participation decision-making processes and guidance that can strengthen these specialized assessments nation-wide.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Before reviewing literature relevant to the difficulty of accurately identifying students with significant intellectual disabilities as appropriate participants in AA-AAS, it is important to examine the short history of alternate assessments.

History of Alternate Assessments

Before the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, Kentucky and Maryland were the first states to develop and implement alternate assessments (AA) for students with significant intellectual disabilities so these students could be included in school accountability systems. IDEA 97 created the first federal mandate for all students to be included in school accountability systems. This mandate required SEAs and LEAs to develop AA for students with disabilities who were unable to participate in general assessments, even with accommodations and supports. The 1999 National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) survey of state special education directors revealed that from less than 1% to more than 4% of states' total student populations were exposed to content that was too limited for them to participate in regular assessments (Quenemoen, 2008). Most states were still developing their respective AA through 2001; however, by 2003 nearly all states were implementing at least one AA (Quenemoen). These early AA were dominated by a functional curricular approach

(Kleinert & Kearns, 1999). However, the tension between functional content and academic content began to emerge as states developed and refined their AA.

The passage of NCLB took AA to a new level by requiring that all students, including students with significant disabilities, demonstrate proficient achievement in reading, math, and science. As with IDEA 97, states were allowed to develop AA to measure the academic achievement of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities. For the small percentage of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities, estimated at about 1% of the total student population, the USDOE allowed states to develop AA based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAS). These alternate academic achievement standards for reading, math, and science could be reduced in depth and complexity so as to be more appropriate for students with significant intellectual disabilities (USDOE, 2005). NCEO surveys of state directors of special education between 1999 and 2005 illustrate the transformation of AA from being assessments of functional skills and some expanded or extended academic content, to being assessments of almost completely expanded or extended grade level academic content (Quenemoen). AA-AAS have evolved into assessments of academic achievement for students with significant intellectual disabilities.

NCLB did not specifically describe the students for whom AA-AAS would be appropriate. However, it did include language indicating that AA-AAS be limited to students with the most significant disabilities and limiting the percentage of passing AA-AAS scores that could be included in AYP calculations to 1%. It is important to note that NCLB did not limit the percentage of students who could participate in AA-AAS; it limited only the percentage of passing AA-AAS scores to be included in AYP.

The 1999 NCEO survey reported that less than 1% to more than 4% of students received instruction too limited to allow them to participate in general assessments. These statistics illustrate the difficulty associated with identifying students for whom early AA would be an appropriate assessment. These percentages do not necessarily reflect the percentage of students with significant intellectual disabilities, only those receiving limited instruction. As with IDEA 97, the language of NCLB provided little guidance to SEAs for identifying students for whom AA-AAS would be appropriate.

Justification of the Problem

Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Muhomba (2009) completed a literature review of AA-AAS as a follow-up to the literature review published by Browder, Spooner et al. (2003). Browder, Spooner et al. identified significant gaps in the literature on AA-AAS and made recommendations for further research based on those gaps. Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Muhomba reviewed literature since 2003 to see how those earlier research gaps had been filled and what new issues had arisen, and to identify any new gaps in the literature. They concluded that studies addressing technical quality should continue as AA-AAS change and improve, especially related to content alignment. They also called for more research in the area of access to the general curriculum for students with significant intellectual disabilities. Specifically, they discussed the need for more research to address the instructional needs of students with significant intellectual disabilities. They also recommended research that examines the relationship between academic achievement as measured by AA-AAS and post-secondary outcomes for students with significant intellectual disabilities. In addition to research recommendations, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Muhomba identified two areas of

concern missing from the AA-AAS literature: the perspectives of students and the perspectives of parents. These two areas clearly are important to the field of AA-AAS and deserve study. It is important to note that concerns about AA-AAS participation rates, ensuring that only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities take AA-AAS, and the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process were also absent from the literature. The obvious absence of these topics from the literature illustrates the need for research in the area of the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process.

Roach (2005) argued that developing a meaningful framework for determining student eligibility is essential to the creation of AA-AAS. He also stressed the importance of IEP teams making informed decisions about student participation in AA-AAS and ensuring the “right” students are identified to take AA-AAS. An examination of the AA-AAS participation criteria and guidelines provided by the USDOE and SEAs illustrates the difficulty IEP teams face when determining student eligibility for participation in AA-AAS. A discussion of Virginia’s participation criteria and guidelines for the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) focuses the discussion for this study on the decision-making process employed by educators for determining VAAP participation for Virginia’s students with significant intellectual disabilities. A review of research on the learner characteristics of students with disabilities participating in AA-AAS across several states rounds out the discussion of the problem with a connection to the students who participate in AA-AAS and how they may be affected by IEP teams that inappropriately apply participation criteria for AA-AAS.

AA-AAS participation criteria and guidelines.

Federal AA-AAS participation criteria.

NCLB requires that all students participate in state assessments designed to measure academic achievement in reading, math, and science. IDEA reinforces NCLB, as both laws stipulate that students with disabilities cannot be exempted from taking state assessments. It becomes a matter of how students with disabilities participate in state assessment accountability systems, not whether they participate.

Federal Regulations for the Inclusion of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Title I Assessment¹ (2003) specify that how a student participates in the state's assessment accountability system is an IEP decision. It is important to emphasize that the IEP team decides how a student will participate in the assessment, not whether or not the student will participate. The Federal Regulations further require states to develop participation guidelines for students with significant intellectual disabilities who may participate in AA-AAS. The specifics of AA-AAS participation criteria are left up to the discretion of each state education agency (SEA).

The USDOE (2005) provides minor clarification of AA-AAS participation guidelines in its *Alternate Achievement Standards for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities: Non-regulatory Guidance*:

Only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities may be assessed based on alternate achievement standards. The regulation does not create a new category of disability. Rather, the Department intended the term "students with

¹ For the remainder of this paper, the Federal Regulations for the Inclusion of Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Title I Assessment will be referred to as Federal Regulations.

the most significant cognitive disabilities” to include that small number of students who are (1) within one or more of the existing categories of disability under the IDEA (e.g., autism, multiple disabilities, traumatic brain injury, etc.); and (2) whose cognitive impairments may prevent them from attaining grade-level achievement standards, even with the very best instruction (USDOE, 2005. p. 23).

The USDOE goes on to emphasize that it is the responsibility of SEAs to develop participation criteria and to communicate those criteria to IEP teams. Other recommendations from the USDOE to SEAs in developing participation guidelines include:

- Criteria that each student must meet before participating in alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards;
- Examples or case study descriptions of students who might be eligible to participate in such an assessment;
- Accommodations that are available for the assessments, and any special instructions that IEP teams need to know if such accommodations require special permission or materials (e.g., Braille editions of the assessment);
- Flow charts for determining which accommodations are appropriate and/or which assessment is appropriate;
- Timelines for making these decisions;
- Any consequences that affect a student as a result of taking an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (e.g., in some States,

- students are not eligible for a regular high school diploma if they take this type of assessment);
- Any consequences that affect a test score as a result of using a particular accommodation;
 - Approaches for ensuring students have access to the general curriculum;
 - Commonly used definitions; [and]
 - Information about how results are reported for individual student reports and in school or district report cards (USDOE, 2005, pp. 25-26).

It is important to recognize this list as *recommendations* to SEAs, not mandates or requirements.

States' AA-AAS participation criteria.

The author's review of AA-AAS participation guidelines posted on each SEA's web site reveals a common core of general criteria provided to IEP teams for making AA-AAS eligibility decisions. The list below summarizes the general AA-AAS participation criteria found in most states' guidance documents²:

- The student must have an IEP or have been found eligible for special education services;
- The student must have a significant intellectual disability that prevents him/her from participating in and/or making progress on the state's grade-level academic content standards, even with the use of accommodations;

² This information is intended to provide an overview of states' AA-AAS participation guidelines and in no way represents any statistical analysis of the information gathered from SEA's web sites.

- The student receives instruction based on the aligned academic content standards (as developed by the state for use with the AA-AAS);
- The student's instructional program includes elements of functional skills development; and
- The student is not working toward a standard diploma.

Many states' guidance documents included additional information for IEP teams, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Other Significant AA-AAS Participation Criteria by State

Participation Criteria	State	Reference
Flow charts to guide IEP discussions on how students with disabilities will participate in the state's assessment accountability system	Kansas	Kansas State Department of Education (2009)
	Maine	Maine Department of Education (2009)
	Massachusetts	Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2910)
	Michigan	Michigan Department of Education (2008)
	Minnesota	Minnesota Department of Education (2010)
References to deficits in adaptive functioning	North Dakota	North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (2009)
	Oklahoma	Oklahoma State Department of Education (n.d.)
	Alaska	Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (2008)
	Arkansas	Arkansas Department of Education (2009)
	California	California Department of Education (2010)
	Delaware	Delaware Department of Education (2009)
	Florida	Florida Department of Education (n.d.)
Hawaii	Hawaii Department of Education (2006)	
Idaho	Idaho State Department of Education (2009)	

Iowa	Iowa Department of Education (2009)
Kentucky	Kentucky Department of Education (2009)
Louisiana	Louisiana Department of Education (2008)
Mississippi	Mississippi Department of Education (2010)
Missouri	Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2009)
Montana	Montana Office of Public Instruction (2010)
Nebraska	Nebraska Department of Education (n.d.)
Nevada	Nevada Department of Education (2001)
New Hampshire	New Hampshire Department of Education (n.d.)
New York	New York State Education Department (2009)
North Dakota	North Dakota Department of Public Instruction
Oklahoma	Oklahoma State Department of Education
Rhode Island	Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2009)
South Carolina	South Carolina Department of Education (n.d.)
Tennessee	Tennessee Department of Education (2009)
Utah	Utah State Office of Education (2006)
Washington	Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2009)

Criteria not appropriate for consideration (expectations that student will fail general assessment, below grade-level reading ability, administrative directive, etc.)

Alaska	Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
Arkansas	Arkansas Department of Education
California	California Department of Education
Connecticut	Connecticut State Department of Education (2009)
Delaware	Delaware Department of Education
Hawaii	Hawaii Department of Education

	Idaho	Idaho State Department of Education
	Illinois	Illinois State Board of Education (2009)
	Indiana	Indiana Department of Education (n.d.)
	Iowa	Iowa Department of Education
	Kansas	Kansas State Department of Education
	Louisiana	Louisiana Department of Education
	Mississippi	Mississippi Department of Education
	Missouri	Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
	Nevada	Nevada Department of Education
	North Carolina	North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2008)
	Rhode Island	Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
	Tennessee	Tennessee Department of Education
	Vermont	Vermont Department of Education (2009)
	Virginia	Virginia Department of Education (2009)
	Wisconsin	Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (n.d.)
Inclusion of or references to supporting documentation of student's need for AA-AAS	Arizona	Arizona Department of Education (2010)
	Kansas	Kansas State Department of Education
	New Hampshire	New Hampshire Department of Education
	New Mexico	New Mexico Public Education Department (2010)

Louisiana's participation criteria document (presented in Appendix B) appeared to be the most comprehensive and included guidance on the types of disability categories that may be appropriate, criteria specifying intellectual and/or adaptive functioning three standard deviations below the mean, and a clear statement that

inclusion of a student in the AA-AAS “shall not be based on an administrative decision to bypass the high stakes testing policy” (Louisiana Department of Education, p. 1).

No other SEA’s AA-AAS participation criteria documents appeared to include clear guidance on what types of disability categories one might expect to find participating on AA-AAS, nor specified three standard deviations below the mean for intellectual and/or adaptive functioning. As discussed earlier, most SEA’s participation criteria documents provide IEP teams with general guidelines for finding students eligible for participation in AA-AAS, leaving wide latitude in the interpretation of said guidelines and the possibility of over- or under-identification of students for participation in AA-AAS.

After the researcher’s informal review of states’ AA-AAS participation criteria was completed, Musson, Thomas, Towles-Reeves, and Kearns (2010) published their analysis of all 50 states’ participation criteria using a qualitative pattern-matching technique. They included the participation criteria each state published on their web sites in October 2007. Their findings were similar to those discussed above, with some additional conclusions and recommendations.

They discussed four significant themes that emerged from their analysis. First, the majority of states did not include IQ cutoff scores, existing disability categories, or educational placement as criteria for participating in AA-AAS. This finding was not surprising because the absence of these components is consistent with federal policy on AA-AAS participation criteria. Most states included having a “significant cognitive impairment” or “significant cognitive disability” as a condition of participation. Having difficulty generalizing skills without additional instruction was another condition most

states included in their AA-AAS participation criteria. Finally, most states included a statement regarding students working toward a certification or credential other than a diploma as part of their criteria. These researchers mentioned that 74% of states mentioned adaptive skills deficits in their criteria, as well.

Musson et al. set forth some important recommendations that confirm the importance of the research in this study. They recognized the diversity of the population of students who take AA-AAS. This finding mirrors Kearns et al. (2011) and Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al. (2009) when they describe students taking AA-AAS as *heterogeneous*. Musson et al. iterate the need for participation guidelines to reflect emerging research and revision to federal policy to ensure students taking AA-AAS are doing so appropriately. It is meaningful to read it in the researchers' own words:

Determining which students will participate in accountability assessments is of critical importance as there are implications for students in breadth of curriculum access and extended time to learn as well as school and district implications of accountability decisions including school choice vouchers, professional development, and rewards or sanctions. To the end, IEP teams need highly salient language for which to identify the appropriate students (Musson et al., 2010, p. 76).

In addition to having "salient language" in participation criteria, it is also important to better understand the decision-making process and how participation criteria are understood and applied by IEP teams to ensure the appropriate students with significant intellectual disabilities take AA-AAS.

VAAP Participation Criteria and Guidance.

The Virginia Department of Education's (VDOE) participation criteria are outlined in the *VAAP Participation Criteria Form* (VDOE, 2011a) (see Appendix A). The criteria outlined on this form are very similar to those found on other SEAs' web sites. IEP teams in Virginia must answer all of the following questions "yes" for a student to be found eligible for VAAP participation:

1. Does the student have a current IEP (or is one being developed)?
2. Does the student demonstrate significant cognitive disabilities?
3. Does the student's present level of performance indicate the need for extensive, direct instruction and/or intervention in a curriculum based on the Aligned Standards of Learning? The present level of performance, or student evaluation, may also include personal management, recreation and leisure, school and community, vocational, communication, social competence, and/or motor skills.
4. Does the student require intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction in a variety of settings to show interaction and achievement?
5. Is the student working toward educational goals other than those prescribed for a Modified Standard, Standard, or Advanced Standard Diploma (VDOE, 2011a)?

The criteria included in this document and information in the *VAAP Implementation Manual 2011-12* (VDOE, 2011b) provide IEP teams with general guidelines for finding students eligible for VAAP participation. Several criteria are open to interpretation by

the IEP team and leave room for erroneous inclusion of students with disabilities in the VAAP.

The VDOE also developed a guidance document (Appendix C) on significant intellectual disabilities describing three areas important to identifying students for participation in the VAAP:

- Learner characteristics, including communication difficulties, uneven learning patterns; multiple disabling conditions, motor impairments, difficulty learning new tasks, and alternative ways of accessing information;
- Adaptive behaviors, with significant delays (three standard deviations below the mean on a standardized adaptive behavior scales instrument), in two or more of the following areas: communication, self-care, home-living, social/interpersonal skills, use of community resources, functional academic skills, work, leisure, or safety; and
- Intellectual functional, including students with a moderate intellectual disability (IQ 35-55), severe intellectual disability (IQ 20 - 40), and profound intellectual disability (IQ below 20) (VDOE, 2009, p. 1).

This guidance document goes on to state that students with mild intellectual disabilities (IQ 50 - 70) might be considered to have significant intellectual disabilities for the purposes of VAAP participation if other factors influence their academic achievement, such as communication skills, sensory disabilities, or physical disabilities (VDOE, 2009). IEP teams are directed not to rely solely on IQ scores when identifying students for participation in the VAAP, but to consider learner characteristics and adaptive functioning, as well. An interesting footnote appears in the document:

Note: Section 200.1 in the Notice of Proposed Rule Making in the Federal Register on March 20, 2003 proposed defining “students with the most significant cognitive disabilities” as students with disabilities under the IDEA whose intellectual functional and adaptive behavior are three or more standard deviations below the mean (VDOE, 2009, p. 3).

However, the VDOE guidance document does not include any definitive cut scores or formulas for considering the number of learner characteristics or adaptive behavior deficits students must possess to be considered for VAAP participation. It is also important to note that school divisions and IEP teams are encouraged, but not required, to use this document when discussing a student’s AA-AAS participation.

This discussion of VAAP participation criteria and guidance illustrates the three levels of the problem stated in the first chapter: the lack of guidance provided by LEAs, the lack of audit of the AA-AAS participation decision-making process, and the lack of understanding of that decision-making process. These issues, as exemplified by the VAAP, make Virginia an excellent location for this proposed study.

Learner characteristics.

Recent research into the learner characteristics of students participating in AA-AAS has been important to the young field of AA-AAS. These descriptive studies have helped researchers and practitioners better understand students currently participating in AA-AAS. However, these studies assume that the students taking AA-AAS were appropriately identified for participation. A close examination of some of the findings from these studies raises concerns that there may be students taking AA-AAS who do not truly possess significant intellectual disabilities.

Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al. (2009) and Kearns, Towles-Reeves et al. (2011) studied the learner characteristics of students participating in AA-AAS across three and seven states, respectively. Both studies used the Learner Characteristics Inventory (LCI) developed by Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Kleinert (2006) to collect information about students participating in AA-AAS based on teacher report. The LCI asks teachers to rate their students on expressive communication, receptive language, vision, hearing, motor skills, engagement, health issues and attendance, reading, and math, with one dichotomous item about students' use of augmentative communication systems (Kearns et al., 2006).

The results from the Kearns et al. (2011) study mirror and extend the findings from the Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al. project. The majority of students from both studies were reported as having expressive and receptive communication at the symbolic level. The smallest percentage of students (7.0 - 17.4%) was communicating at the pre-symbolic level (Kearns et al., 2011). Of the students communicating at the emerging or pre-symbolic levels, only about half of them had access to or used an assistive communication system (Kearns et al., 2011). Both studies also found the majority of students to be reading basic sight words and completing computational procedures with or without a calculator. This finding is not unexpected for students with significant intellectual disabilities. A small percentage of students from both studies were reported to be reading fluently with critical understanding and applying computational procedures to solve problems. Kearns et al. (2011) found that some of these students with higher reading and math skills were in high school, although this was not a consistent finding across states. It is impossible to judge the degree of

intellectual disability experienced by these students with high reading and math skills based on the other information reported on the LCI. It would be interesting to know the disability category and IQ of these students.

Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al. did not include information about the AA-AAS participation rates of the states participating in the study. However, Kearns et al. (2011) reported AA-AAS participation rates between 0.70% and 1.17%. On the surface, these participation rates appear to reflect the small percentage of students with significant intellectual disabilities one would expect to find participating in AA-AAS. However, the inclusion of students from disability categories not traditionally associated with significant intellectual disabilities raises some questions about the appropriateness of their participation in AA-AAS. While intellectual disability was the largest disability category of participating students represented by each state in the study, Kearns et al. (2011) found almost every IDEA disability category represented. Table 2 illustrates the ranges of AA-AAS participation rates by IDEA disability category reported by each state included in the study. The relatively high percentages of students with intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and autism are not unexpected. However the upper ranges of students with other health impairments, specific learning disabilities, and a primary disability of hearing impairment pose areas of concern. One would not expect students from these disability categories to be participating in an assessment for students with significant intellectual disabilities.

Table 2: Range of AA-AAS Participation Rates by IDEA Disability Category Across Seven States

IDEA Disability Category	Range of AA-AAS Rates
Intellectual disability	36% - 73.6%
Multiple disabilities	<1.0% - 24.4%
Autism	13.9% - 26.5%
Other health impairment	1.3% - 10.8%
Emotional disability	0.0% - 2.7%
Specific learning disability	<1.0% - 6.2%
Traumatic brain injury	<1.0% - 2.8%
Speech language impairment	0.0% - 1.6%
Orthopedic impairment	<1.0% - 3.3%
Hearing impairment	<1.0% - 7.4%
Deaf blind	0.0% - <1.0%
Visual Impairment	0.0% - <1.0%

Note: This table includes data gathered from the states participating in the Kearns et al. (2011) study.

Understanding the learner characteristics of students taking AA-AAS is important to the continued refinement of these assessments, and to ensure the assessments are designed to assess the academic achievement of students with significant intellectual disabilities. The wide range of learner characteristics of the students included in these studies illustrates the *heterogeneous* nature of students with significant intellectual disabilities. This *heterogeneity* contributes to the difficulty of accurately identifying the students for whom AA-AAS are intended. If students who do not truly possess significant intellectual disabilities are participating in AA-AAS, it becomes difficult to gather accurate information about the learner characteristics of students for whom the

AA-AAS are intended. This, in turn, can result in invalid assessment results and defeat the purpose of having alternate assessments for students with significant intellectual disabilities.

Justification of the Purpose

It is important to understand the decision-making process employed by IEP teams in determining eligibility for students with disabilities participating in AA-AAS. An examination of the 1% cap on passing AA-AAS scores that can be included in AYP calculations, the relationship between the identification of participating students and AA-AAS technical quality, and the participation rates of students taking VAAP in Virginia school divisions illustrate the importance of this issue.

The 1% cap.

Federal Regulations (2003) specify only 1% of passing scores based on AA-AAS may be included in AYP calculations. The 1% cap is intended to protect the educational interests of individual students and to provide an “incentive for schools to provide maximum learning opportunities for each student” (Federal Regulations, p. 4). This cap is not intended to prevent students from participating in AA-AAS if it is appropriate, but to illustrate the narrow population of students for whom AA-AAS are intended and to ensure that only the students who truly possess significant intellectual disabilities take AA-AAS.

The Federal Regulations direct school divisions with AA-AAS pass rates above 1% to develop procedures for overturning passing AA-AAS scores for AYP calculations. It is important to note that the 1% cap ruling and subsequent overturning of scores in

school divisions exceeding the cap does not influence how students' individual scores are reported to parents.

The Federal Regulations recognize that some schools may have concentrated numbers of students with significant intellectual disabilities for whom AA-AAS are appropriate because of specialized programs or services. Therefore, the 1% cap does not apply to AYP calculations at the school level. This does not mean that AA-AAS participation is unlimited at the school level. The USDOE expects that no more than 9.0% of students with disabilities will participate in AA-AAS (Federal Regulations).

By placing a 1% cap on the number of passing AA-AAS scores LEAs and SEAs may include in AYP calculations, the Federal Regulations quantify the seriousness of limiting AA-AAS only to those students with the most significant intellectual disabilities, for whom AA-AAS are intended. As we approach the NCLB target for 100% of students to demonstrate proficiency in reading and math on state assessments by 2014, the 1% proficiency cap will translate into a 1% participation cap. The Federal Regulations do not address this scenario. The fact remains that if all students, including those with the most significant intellectual disabilities, are expected to show proficiency in reading and math on state assessments by 2014 and there is a 1% cap on the number of passing AA-AAS scores that may be included in AYP calculations, the 1% cap ruling will eventually become a 1% participation cap.

Since USDOE provides no specific guidance on how to accurately identify this small percentage of students, it is up to SEAs to develop clear and specific participation criteria that IEP teams may use to accurately identify students with disabilities for

participation in AA-AAS. Understanding how IEP teams make these participation decisions is one step in developing clear and specific AA-AAS participation criteria.

Technical quality of AA-AAS.

USDOE (2005) requires AA-AAS meet the same high technical quality as other state assessments of student achievement to be included in AYP calculations. One element important to the technical documentation of AA-AAS is a description of the students taking the test (Marion & Pellegrino, 2006). Kohl et al. (2006) state that student eligibility criteria can influence the technical quality of AA-AAS. However, studies examining AA-AAS participants as an element of technical quality appear absent from the body of literature. Even though this research is absent, ensuring the “right” students are participating in and taking AA-AAS is important to the technical quality of AA-AAS, nonetheless. Understanding the decision-making process for finding students with disabilities eligible for AA-AAS is an important first step in this neglected area of study.

VAAP Participation Rates.

The participation rates of students taking the VAAP from 2006 through 2009 were obtained from VDOE. Tables 3 and 4 display descriptive statistics on the participation rates for the VAAP across the Commonwealth in reading and math, respectively. Virginia has 136 school divisions, divided into eight regions. VAAP participation rates were available for between 133 and 134 school divisions for each year. No reason is provided for the missing data. The researcher excluded data from three non-traditional school divisions because these schools include specialized programs for students with disabilities or students being served in the Department of

Corrections. The VAAP participation rates for these schools were artificially inflated because of their student populations, and do not fit the trends seen in traditional public school divisions across the Commonwealth.

Table 3: VAAP Participation Rates in Reading

	2006	2007	2008	2009
Minimum Participation Rate	0.16%	0.12%	0.12%	0.17%
Maximum Participation Rate	3.74%	3.18%	3.18%	3.51%
Mean Participation Rate	1.27%	1.07%	1.07%	1.21%
Divisions over 1% Participation	62.31%	48.10%	48.10%	59.23%
Divisions over 1.5% Participation	23.08%	12.98%	12.98%	19.23%
Divisions over 2% Participation	12.30%	6.11%	6.11%	9.23%

Note: Data based on information provided by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

Table 4: VAAP Participation Rates in Math

	2006	2007	2008	2009
Minimum Participation Rate	0.16%	0.23%	0.23%	0.17%
Maximum Participation Rate	3.74%	3.12%	3.12%	3.32%
Mean Participation Rate	1.27%	1.06%	1.06%	1.18%
Divisions over 1% Participation	62.31%	45.80%	45.80%	57.69%
Divisions over 1.5% Participation	23.08%	12.21%	12.21%	19.23%
Divisions over 2% Participation	12.30%	6.87%	6.87%	9.69%

Note: Data based on information provided by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

These data reflect the fact that a significant percentage of Virginia school divisions have VAAP participation rates over 1%: between 45.80% and 62.31% across both content areas and all years reported. In smaller school divisions, one or two students can cause a division's participation to jump from 1% to 1.5%. Therefore, including calculations of school divisions with participation rates over 1.5% and 2% help to clarify this issue. The percentages of school divisions with participation rates above 1.5% (between 12.21% and 23.08%) and 2% (between 6.11% and 12.30%) are less startling than those over 1%, but are significant just the same. These VAAP participation rates call into question whether or not some school divisions are having difficulty identifying the "right" students for participation in the VAAP. Understanding how IEP teams in Virginia school divisions apply the VAAP participation criteria to individual students with disabilities may explain why so many students are taking the VAAP.

Importance of the investigation.

Understanding the decision-making process employed by IEP teams in determining student eligibility for participation in AA-AAS is important to ensuring the “right” students are identified for AA-AAS participation. This knowledge is important to the technical quality of AA-AAS, the appropriate interpretation of AA-AAS scores for individual students, and the calculation of AYP for LEAs and SEAs. It is especially important to ensuring that students who do not truly possess significant intellectual disabilities are not relegated to curriculum and instruction that is unnecessarily reduced in depth and complexity.

The knowledge gained from this study illuminated the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the current process in Virginia. Since AA-AAS eligibility criteria are similar across all states, the information revealed in this Virginia study has implications beyond the Commonwealth.

Justification of the Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Who are the primary decision-makers for determining a student’s participation in VAAP?
2. What formal policies and informal practices inform the decision-making process?
3. How do these formal policies and informal practices influence the decision-making process?
4. What other factors influence the decision-making process?
5. Could the decision-making process be improved upon? How and why?

An examination of issues related to the 1% cap and the re-examination of previously discussed issues (lack of guidance from the USDOE and VDOE regarding participation criteria and AA-AAS participation rates) will provide evidence of the relevance of these research questions.

State's requests for exceptions to the 1% cap.

A provision of the 1% cap not previously discussed is the ability of states to apply for a waiver of the 1% cap (Federal Regulations). The USDOE maintains web links to policy letters to states providing guidance on various issues on its web site.

Virginia and the 1% cap.

An examination of policy letters to the VDOE (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Virginia, 2004; Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Virginia 2, 2004; Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Virginia 3, 2005) reveals that VDOE requested an exception to the 1% cap. The original VDOE request was for a three-year exception at 3.5%, which was denied (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Virginia). A second request for a one-year exception at 1.13% appears based on pass rates from the 2003-2004 school year at 1.13%, and was granted by the USDOE (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Virginia 2). The 1.13% exception was extended to the 2004-2005 school year (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Virginia 3). It is difficult to ascertain all of the details from these two policy letters. However, the USDOE makes it clear in all three letters that Virginia must ensure that only the students with the most significant intellectual disabilities be allowed to participate in the VAAP.

Other states' requests for exceptions to the 1% cap.

Four other states requested exceptions to the 1% cap: Minnesota, Montana, Ohio, and South Dakota. Three out of four requests were granted, with some states receiving extensions of their original requests. As with Virginia, states granted an exception to the 1% cap were admonished to ensure that only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities participated in the AA-AAS.

Minnesota requested a one-year exception to the cap at 2%. The request was denied by USDOE because the purpose of the request was to enable Minnesota to include passing scores of students without the most significant intellectual disabilities participating in its AA-AAS in AYP calculations (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Minnesota, 2005).

Montana and South Dakota were both granted a two-year exception to the 1% cap at 2% for school divisions with fewer than 200 students in tested grades (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Montana, 2004; Guidance on Alternate Assessments: South Dakota, 2005). Both requests were granted based on the unique nature of their rural school divisions. Montana's two-year exception at 2% for school divisions with fewer than 200 students in tested grades was extended through the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 school years (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Montana 2, 2006).

Ohio's original exception request was granted at 1.3% for the 2003-2004 school year (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Ohio, 2004). Ohio's second exception request included a one-year extension, with an increase in the cap to 1.4% (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Ohio 2, 2005). The one-year extension was granted; however, USDOE retained the cap at 1.3%. In March 2006, Ohio again requested an

extension of its one-year exception, with an increase of its cap to 1.5% (Guidance on Alternate Assessments: Ohio 3, 2006). As with the 2005 request USDOE granted the extension, but retained the 1.3% cap.

The fact that Virginia and these other states requested and, in most cases, were granted exceptions to the 1% cap illustrates how states have wrestled with identifying the “right” students for participation in AA-AAS. It is important to note that the USDOE no longer grants exceptions allowing states to exceed the 1% cap on proficient AA-AAS scores that may be included in AYP calculations (Superintendent’s Memo No. 47, 2008). Answers to the research questions outlined in this study provided valuable material that informed the process for identifying students with disabilities for inclusion in AA-AAS.

Lack of guidance from USDOE and VDOE regarding AA-AAS participation criteria.

As discussed in previous sections, the guidance provided by the USDOE regarding AA-AAS participation criteria for students with significant intellectual disabilities is general and leaves states much latitude in developing their AA-AAS participation criteria. The lack of specific guidance from the USDOE to SEAs seems to have translated into a lack of guidance to LEAs, in most cases. Most states’ AA-AAS participation criteria are general and lack specific guidance to LEAs and IEP teams to ensure that only the students with the most significant intellectual disabilities, the “right” students, participate in AA-AAS. The research questions guiding this study provided insight into how IEP teams interpret and apply the VAAP participation criteria to students with disabilities.

AA-AAS participation by students without significant intellectual disabilities.

As discussed earlier, the statistics displayed in Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the high participation rates experienced by some Virginia school divisions. The research questions provided a venue for investigating how IEP teams in Virginia interpret and apply the VAAP participation criteria to individual students.

This study's research questions were appropriate because they sought to discover the kind of training and guidance Virginia special education and assessment administrators are providing IEP teams in the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process and how IEP team members interpret and apply the training and guidance they receive. It is important to understand the VAAP participation decision-making process, because it will inform future AA-AAS policy development, improve the AA-AAS participation decision-making process, ensure the consistent and accurate application of the participation criteria, and help ensure that AA-AAS are appropriate for intended students.

Justification of the Methodology

Most of the studies conducted in the field of AA-AAS have employed quantitative research methods, covering a wide range of topics, including: validity and content alignment (Elliott, Compton, & Roach, 2007; Flowers et al., 2006; Marion & Pellegrino, 2006; Roach, 2005; Roach et al., 2005; Spooner et al., 2006), learner characteristics of students participating in AA-AAS (Kearns et al., 2006; Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al., 2009), teacher perceptions of AA (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005), and best practices for implementing AA-AAS (Browder et

al., 2004; Browder, Karvonen, Davis, Fallin, & Courtade-Little, 2005; Karvonen & Huynh, 2007; Towles-Reeves & Kleinert, 2006; Turner, Baldwin, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2000). While different methodologies and statistical analyses were used by different research teams, quantitative techniques were appropriately applied and produced findings relevant to the field of AA-AAS.

The research questions developed for this proposed study required a different approach. Qualitative descriptive interviews were used to investigate the VAAP participation decision-making processes used by IEP teams, as the researcher sought to answer the research questions.

One of the strengths of qualitative research is that it allows the researcher to gather and immerse herself in rich data collected from study participants. These descriptive data allow the researcher “to describe and explain the patterns related to the phenomena” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 317). The descriptive power of qualitative research methods were suited to this investigation into the decision-making processes used by IEP teams to find students eligible to participate in AA-AAS.

Other researchers have employed qualitative descriptive interviews to investigate and describe the decision-making process experienced by their study participants. Three examples from the medical field are discussed below. Frost, Shaw, Montgomery, and Murphy (2009) conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 30 pregnant women to investigate the decision-making process they used to choose a method of having their babies delivered after experiencing previous caesarean sections. Nekhlyudov, Bush, Bonomi, Ludman, and Newton (2009) conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with doctors and their female patients to describe their decision-making

process in choosing to prescribe or not prescribe hormone therapy, based on their concerns about the increased risk of breast cancer. Finally, Diamond, Schenker, Curry, Bradley, and Fernandez (2008) conducted in-depth interviews with resident physicians to better understand the decision-making process these doctors used when treating and communicating with patients having limited English proficiency. While these three studies investigated different research questions with very different populations of participants, all three illustrate the value of using qualitative interviewing as a means of investigating decision-making processes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A qualitative case study seeks to explore the dimensions of a bounded system, such as a group, individual, setting event, phenomenon, or process (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). This qualitative study employed a descriptive interview method to investigate the VAAP eligibility decision-making process.

Design

Interviewing in qualitative research “is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 103). This study used a qualitative research design, relying on in-depth semi-structured interviews as a primary source of data collection. Reflexive field notes and observations supplemented data from the interviews.

Participants

Sampling.

Purposeful sampling is an accepted technique for identifying and recruiting participants for qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). In purposeful sampling, participants are chosen because they are considered *information-rich* resources with knowledge and experience with the phenomenon under

investigation (McMillan & Schumacher). Case managers³ of students who participate in the VAAP were recruited for this study. While VAAP participation is an IEP team decision, it is often the student's case manager who steers an IEP meeting. Purposeful sampling was used to identify school divisions in central Virginia with VAAP participation rates over 1%. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) provided VAAP participation data for Virginia school divisions spanning six years, from 2006 to 2011. Participants were recruited from school divisions in Superintendents Regions 1, 5 and 8 with VAAP participation rates above 1% for four of the six years for which data were available (Tables 5 and 6). The school divisions from which participants were recruited represented large, medium, and small, and urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Table 5: Reading VAAP Participation Rates for 2006 – 2011 for School Divisions From Whom Participants Were Recruited.

School Division	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Division A	1.76	1.33	1.33	1.73	1.73	1.13
Division B*	2.39	2.14	2.14	1.63	1.86	1.37
Division C	0.86	1.06	1.06	1.98	1.98	2.46
Division D*	1.24	1.15	1.15	1.37	1.43	1.50
Division E	2.56	1.84	1.84	1.26	2.46	2.08
Division F	2.76	0.99	0.99	1.40	1.62	1.60
Division G*	3.65	2.80	2.80	3.32	3.46	3.78
Division H	1.61	1.06	1.06	1.18	1.18	1.97
Division I	1.14	0.72	0.72	1.56	1.75	1.26
Division J	1.22	1.23	1.23	1.91	2.19	2.63
Division K*	2.19	1.73	1.73	2.09	2.09	1.20
Division L	1.75	1.36	1.36	1.52	1.97	1.89

Note: Data obtained from Virginia Department of Education. *School divisions included in first phase of participant recruitment.

³ The term *case managers* will be used to denote case managers of students who participate in the VAAP for the remainder of this paper.

Table 6: Math VAAP Participation Rates for 2006 – 2011 for School Divisions From Whom Participants Were Recruited.

School Division	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Division A	1.80	1.41	1.41	1.69	1.73	1.13
Division B*	2.39	2.14	2.14	1.63	1.86	1.37
Division C	0.86	1.06	1.06	1.98	1.98	2.46
Division D*	1.24	1.13	1.13	1.38	1.44	1.49
Division E	2.56	1.88	1.88	1.26	2.36	2.08
Division F	2.76	0.99	0.99	1.40	1.69	1.60
Division G*	3.65	2.70	2.70	3.32	3.46	3.78
Division H	1.61	0.82	0.82	1.18	1.30	1.97
Division I	1.14	0.81	0.81	1.66	1.75	1.26
Division J	1.22	1.23	1.23	1.91	2.19	2.63
Division K*	2.19	1.92	1.92	2.09	2.09	1.20
Division L	1.75	1.36	1.36	1.97	1.97	1.89

Note: Data obtained from Virginia Department of Education. *School divisions included in first phase of participant recruitment.

Researchers employing semi-structured in-depth interviews differ on the number of participants required to conduct a meaningful study. Some assert that the number should be established before the study begins, while others discuss the merit of leaving the number of participants open-ended and seeking more participants as “new dimensions of the issues become apparent through earlier interviews” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995, as cited by Seidman, 2006, p. 55). Seidman, himself, suggests erring on the side of having too many participants, so as not to have too little data to establish themes and meanings. Therefore, the original research plan projected recruitment of two elementary, middle, and high school case managers from urban, suburban, and rural school divisions, for a total of 18 participants.

The first phase of recruitment targeted four school divisions in Region 1: one mid-sized urban, one large suburban, and two small rural. These four school divisions are marked with an asterisk in Tables 5 and 6. It was believed the sample population should be stratified by type of school division (urban, suburban, and rural) and school level (elementary, middle, and high) to produce a rich sampling of case managers and to recognize differences in experiences based on type of school division or school level. Recruitment from these four school divisions proved inadequate, producing only nine participants and making it necessary to approach additional school divisions for participation.

The second phase of recruitment included school divisions from Regions 5 and 8, because a limited number of school divisions in Region 1 with VAAP participation rates above 1% were willing to allow the researcher to recruit their teachers for the study. Early interviews and initial data analysis revealed differences based on the school level (elementary, middle, or high), but not on locality (urban, suburban, or rural). Therefore, school divisions included in the second phase of recruitment were chosen based solely on VAAP participation rates.

The 13 case managers who participated in this study were all women teaching special education in central Virginia. Their experience teaching students with significant intellectual disabilities ranged from one to thirty years, with nine case managers having between three and nine years teaching experience. Their years of experience implementing the VAAP ranged from one to ten, with nine of them having between two and six years experience. Four of them were African-American and nine were white, but not Hispanic. Five case managers taught in high schools, four in middle, and five in

elementary. Six came from suburban schools, five from rural schools, and two from urban schools.

Access to participants.

Seidman (2006) discussed the importance of gaining access to participants by first seeking permission from those in authority over potential participants. Therefore, the researcher sought permission from school leaders in potential school divisions to include their teachers in the study.

Since the researcher had worked as a Division Director of Testing (DDOT) in a school division in Region 1 and knew DDOTs in several other school divisions, it was thought these connections would facilitate gaining permission to conduct research in those divisions. However, once VAAP participation rates were analyzed, it became apparent that the researcher did not know the DDOTs from any potential school divisions. Therefore, the researcher contacted the superintendent's office of potential school divisions by telephone to inquire about the process for gaining permission to conduct educational research in their school division.

One school division had an official application process for those wanting to conduct educational research in their division. This process was successfully completed and permission granted for the researcher to proceed with recruitment. The permission process for the remaining school divisions was less formal. The researcher provided each school division with a packet of materials including the purpose of the study with references, research questions, study procedures, role of the school division, introductory email to potential participants, consent form, and interview protocols. A sample of the packet is located in Appendix D, excluding the introductory email to

potential participants, consent form, and interview protocols, which are included in other appendices and are described below. Eight additional school divisions granted permission to conduct the study based on the documentation provided by the researcher. Not all school divisions approached by the researcher agreed to participate. One school division did not respond to initial contacts by the researcher, two school divisions did not respond once supporting materials related to the study were provided, and two school divisions opted not to participate because of the heavy workload of their teachers. As illustrated in Tables 5 and 6, 12 school divisions allowed the researcher to recruit participants for the study.

Once the researcher gained permission from school divisions to recruit teachers for the study, the researcher applied to and gained permission from the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). Initial IRB approval was granted on March 31, 2011. IRB approval to implement revisions related to the second phase of recruitment was issued on October 7, 2011.

Informed consent.

Seidman (2006) discusses eight elements that should be addressed when developing informed consent parameters for qualitative interviewing: (a) an explicit invitation to participate in a research study with details about the *what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom*; (b) risks; (c) rights; (d) possible benefits; (e) confidentiality of records; (f) dissemination; (g) special conditions for children; and (h) contact information and copies of the form (pp. 61-62). The consent form was developed under the guidelines provided by the VCU IRB and is located in Appendix F. All eight of Seidman's elements of informed consent were included in the consent form

used for this study, except *special conditions for children*, which was not relevant to this study. Informed consent was described to all participants during the initial telephone conversation. It was read by, discussed with, and signed by all participants using the *Informed Consent Form* (Appendix E) at the first interview. *Informed Consent Forms* were kept on file with the researcher, with a copy given to participants after the researcher's dissertation chair added his signature to the form.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Interview guide.

Traditional techniques for establishing instrumentation validity and reliability do not suffice for qualitative research methods. Instead, the qualitative researcher uses techniques, such as interview guide critiques by knowledgeable professionals in the field, pilot testing of the interview guide, and revision of the initial interview questions for *final phraseology* to establish rigor for the interview protocol (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews, focused on participants' experiences with VAAP and the eligibility decision-making process, were used to gather data for this study. Interviews followed an interview guide with open-ended questions. However, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the interview's content was not rigidly controlled, so as not to limit the ability of participants to tell their VAAP stories. These authors emphasized the importance of maintaining flexibility in the interview process and being open to areas of the topic important to the participant that may not be reflected in the interview guide.

Interview protocols (Appendices G and H) were designed to solicit information from participants, but also to encourage participants to talk freely about other issues of importance to them, related to the VAAP. The researcher's experience as a VAAP case manager and DDOT gave her expertise and resources to develop the interview protocols. The researcher also obtained feedback from case managers in her school division for refining the interview questions. After reviewing the protocols, they offered suggestions for improving some of the questions to make them more easily understood by case managers in the field. Two questions were reworded to accommodate those suggestions.

The first interview provided an opportunity for participants and the researcher to get acquainted and to establish rapport. Open-ended questions solicited information about participants' present teaching assignments, how long they have been teaching students with significant intellectual disabilities, and their general experiences with the VAAP, including training and implementation. At the close of the interview, participants were asked to think about how they and their IEP teams approach the VAAP participation decision-making process and to gather copies of any training materials or guidance documents they could share to illustrate their experience.

The second interview delved more deeply into the participants' decision-making process with the VAAP. Open-ended questioning allowed participants to share their stories about how their IEP teams work together to make VAAP participation decisions, what training they received for making those decisions, and what the VAAP decision-making process meant to them.

The original study proposal included a pilot study to further refine the interview protocols. This was not possible given the disappointing return on recruitment efforts. Therefore, the researcher used data collected from interviews conducted with the first three participants to refine the interview questions. Additional questions addressed issues including parent participation and training related to VAAP eligibility criteria, when participants did not discuss these topics initially.

Procedure

Entry into the field.

Once the researcher received approval to conduct the study by school divisions and the VCU IRB, school division representatives distributed the introductory email (Appendix H) to their teachers and case managers working with VAAP students. The introductory email described the purpose of the study, the link between the case manager's experience with the VAAP and the study, and the time commitment required of study participants. Case managers were invited to contact the researcher via email or telephone if they were interested in participating in the study. In the first phase of recruitment, school division representatives redistributed the introductory email after two weeks, when response to the email was poor. A redistribution of the introductory email did not occur during the second phase of recruitment because of time constraints.

Upon receiving email responses from potential participants, the researcher replied within 24 hours, thanking the person for expressing interest in the study and establishing a time to speak with the candidate on the telephone to discuss details of the study. These email exchanges resulted in the researcher and participant speaking on the telephone to discuss details of the study, informed consent, scheduling the first

interview, and the researcher answering questions about the study. This exchange between researcher and participant was followed during both phases of recruitment.

Conduct of interviews.

The first interview for the first five participants lasted between 10 and 15 minutes and was recorded in two formats: electronically and using a mini tape recorder. It began with the business of discussing and gaining informed consent, confirming contact information between researcher and participant, and establishing rapport. Participants were alerted before recording began. The recorded portion of the first interview included the participants' responses to questions and topics outlined in the first interview protocol (Appendix G). The interviews concluded with a word of thanks from the researcher and the scheduling and/or confirming of the second interview. In preparation for the second interview, the researcher asked participants to reflect on the VAAP participation decision-making process they and their IEP teams used and what the decision-making process meant to them.

The second interview for the first five participants lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was, again, recorded electronically and using a mini tape recorder. It began with a few minutes of reviewing interview protocols and informed consent, and re-establishing rapport between the researcher and participant. The recorded portion of this interview covered topics outlined in the second interview protocol (Appendix H). Participants were invited to add any final insights at the conclusion of the interview.

After the first five interviews were completed, it became apparent that the original time projections for the length of each interview were overestimated. Subsequent participants were offered and accepted the option to discuss the topics for both

interviews in a single session. The final eight interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes.

Interviews were conducted in locations convenient and comfortable for study participations. Two participants were interviewed in their homes, three were interviewed in the study room of a local branch library, and the remaining eight were interviewed at participants' schools.

Reflexive field notes and observations.

Reflexive field notes and observations are important tools for fully understanding the context of qualitative inquiry (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Immediately following each interview, the researcher wrote reflexive field notes and other observations before leaving the interview site. For interviews that were conducted at participants' homes or schools, the researcher sat in her car to write reflexive field notes before leaving the site. When interviews were conducted at the local branch library, the researcher was able to record field notes while sitting in the study room, before leaving the site. These additional data served as a mechanism for triangulation during data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Supporting documents.

As mentioned earlier, participants were asked to share any VAAP documentation or training materials they felt would be relevant to the study. Only three participants felt compelled to share documents. These materials included a VAAP Implementation Manual, a copy of the *VDOE Guidance Document: Significant Cognitive Disabilities* (Appendix C), and a tracking sheet for managing student progress toward completing the VAAP.

Closure.

In his discussion of ethical issues in in-depth interviewing, Seidman pointed out the importance of providing closure to participants as interviews are concluded and the study is completed. The researcher sent hand-written thank you notes to all study participants that included a \$10 gift certificate to *Walmart* as a gesture of thanks for participating in the study. Participants received a summary of findings and recommendations, as well. Representatives of each school division that aided in participant recruitment also received an electronic copy of the summary of findings and recommendations via email. This study, and the resultant dissertation, would not have been possible without their sacrifice of time and energy.

Data Analysis

Research questions.

Data analysis for this study was driven by the research questions:

1. Who are the primary decision-makers for determining a student's participation in VAAP?
2. What formal policies and informal practices inform the decision-making process?
3. How do these formal policies and informal practices influence the decision-making process?
4. What other factors influence the decision-making process?
5. Could the decision-making process be improved upon? How and why?

These research questions served as preliminary themes as the researcher began coding participants' interviews and reviewing reflexive field notes and documents.

However, the researcher was open to the meanings portrayed by participants' own words and allowed their categories and themes to emerge.

Rigor.

McMillan and Schumacher (2006) discuss the validity of qualitative designs in terms of the "degree of congruence between the explanations of the phenomena and the realities of the world" (p. 324). Instead of applying statistical procedures to establish validity and reliability, the researcher employs qualitative design features to establish the rigor of the study. The following strategies were used to establish rigor for this study: peer debriefing, peer review, reflexive field notes and observations, mechanically recorded interviews, participant review of transcriptions, and use of participant language with verbatim accounts.

Inductive data analysis.

Before data analysis could begin, interview recordings had to be transcribed, reviewed, and imported into TAMSAalyzer (TAMS), a Macintosh-based qualitative data analysis software program. An experienced stenographer transcribed all but three of the recorded interviews. A scanned copy of her signed confidentiality agreement is included in Appendix I. The researcher transcribed the remaining interview recordings.

Before interview transcripts could be imported into TAMS for coding, they had to be converted into raw text files (.rtf). The two interview transcripts for the first five participants were combined into a single document. This resulted in there being a single .rtf document for each participant, which was then imported into TAMS for analysis. A few typographical errors were discovered in the transcripts once they were imported into TAMS. The use of .rtf documents in TAMS allowed the researcher to edit

documents within the analysis program without having to make the changes in the original documents and repeat steps to re-import documents into the program. Any changes to the transcripts once they were imported into TAMS were purely to correct typographical errors and did not change the original meaning or intent of participants' wording.

Coding.

Coding was completed using coding features of the TAMS program. The researcher created a code by naming it, providing a description, and designating a color. Sub-codes were easily generated by supplementing the original code with a ">" character and the additional name. For example: The code *parents* had four sub-codes (active, discussions, options, and passive). The naming convention for those sub-codes became *parents>active*, *parents>discussions*, etc. The names of codes, and their accompanying sub-codes, were listed in a window beside the transcript text. The researcher coded text by highlighting the significant section of text and selecting the code name in the window. This resulted in the identified section of text being offset with the code's colored naming convention in brackets. This made coding easy to recognize within the body of the text. Once coding was completed, TAMS generated export files of the codes that copied into a spreadsheet program. Because TAMS is a Macintosh native program, the researcher was able to work with coded data in the Macintosh spreadsheet program entitled Numbers. Numbers is the Macintosh equivalent of Microsoft Excel. These computer programs allowed the researcher to code, export, and manipulate data.

The TAMS program allowed the researcher to insert universal codes in each transcript to identify the participant, their school level (elementary, middle, or high), and their locality type (rural, suburban, or urban). These universal codes were helpful during the more intense inductive process that took place once coding was completed.

The researcher studied the first three interviews to begin the coding process. As meaningful sections of data were identified, a code was chosen to name it. Early coding used a naming convention that reflected participant's own words. For example, *cracks* was an early code used to name sections of text that described students as "falling through the cracks" because they were not taking an assessment. This code was later abandoned because only two participants described this phenomenon. As subsequent transcripts were coded, the code names evolved, with some codes being added, similar codes being combined, and others being abandoned (as noted above).

Emergence of categories and themes.

Once coding was completed and exported into spreadsheets, the spreadsheets were printed and ready for inductive analysis. The researcher immersed herself in the data by mounting the coded spreadsheet on the wall. She studied each set of codes and sub-codes, making notes, moving codes around, adding comments, and reviewing field notes. Categories started to emerge early on, which required some recoding to merge similar codes and abandon others. The remaining codes became categories and sub-codes became potential themes. The researcher tallied how many times each sub-code appeared and was articulated by individual participants. Most sub-codes that reflected comments and stories from seven or more participants became themes. The most significant themes reflected the perceptions of nine to twelve participants.

Researcher role.

Brantlinger et al. (2005) provide an excellent discussion of the qualitative researcher as “the instrument” and the importance of considering the role of the researcher in qualitative inquiry. While some critics of qualitative research argue this intimate role causes data collection and analysis to be too subjective, Brantlinger et al. tout this as one of the strengths of qualitative methods. However, it is important for the researcher to establish and understand his/her role as a researcher and how his/her knowledge and experience with the topic inform data collection and analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

As mentioned in chapter 1, the research questions served as preliminary themes and foreshadowed the findings. The interview questions were used to focus participants’ descriptions of their experiences with implementing and determining eligibility for the VAAP. Naturally, as categories and themes emerged from the data, the themes related to the research questions emerged. However, as discussed in the findings, some themes illuminated the research questions in unexpected ways. The researcher worked hard to let categories and themes naturally emerge from the data without being unduly influenced by the research questions. This was accomplished by using participants’ own words to name codes and sub-codes during data analysis, and in reporting of findings in chapter 4.

The researcher was keenly aware of her extensive experience with the VAAP, as a case manager and supervisor of the process. Again, using participants’ own words in coding, data analysis, and reporting the findings helped prevent the researcher from asserting her own meanings on the data. One of the most significant themes to emerge

was completely unexpected, and another issue the researcher expected to hear about was mentioned by only one participant. Recognition of these circumstances serves to strengthen the validity of the findings of this study.

Member checking.

Member checking is one of nine credibility measures for qualitative research discussed by Brantlinger et al. (2005). In the first level of member checking, the researcher provides the participant with an interview transcription before data analysis begins. The participant is asked to review the transcription for accuracy and to provide clarification or correction where the participant deems appropriate.

After each interview was transcribed, the researcher emailed an electronic copy of the transcript to the participant for review. Study participants were encouraged to make any changes they thought fitting, whether to add or delete remarks, and then asked to return the reviewed transcription by email. One participant asked that a printed copy be mailed for her to review. She reviewed this printed copy and mailed it back to the researcher with her changes marked in red. No interview data were included in this study that had not been reviewed by participants. Four case managers made corrections and added clarification to their interview transcription. Nine emailed the researcher to indicate they were content with the transcription as it was.

Data triangulation.

Data triangulation is another of the credibility measures discussed by Brantlinger et al. This technique requires the researcher to use multiple and varied sources of data as a way to establish consistency during data analysis. The reflexive field notes and observations recorded after every interview were used during the inductive data

analysis phase to confirm some of the inferences made about the data. Unfortunately, the documents provided by participants were few and added little to the inductive data analysis.

Peer review.

A former Coordinator of Special Education in a central Virginia school division who recently defended her qualitative dissertation served as the peer reviewer for this study. She reviewed coding for the first nine interviews, in the form of full transcripts with TAMS coding markers and color designations, and exports of the coded text segments with code definitions. There were 226 codes in the documents submitted for review. The peer reviewer suggested 42 changes, 19 of which were incorporated into the coding by the researcher. The peer review resulted in 81.42% agreement on the codes. Coding changes were made after the peer review based on analysis of the data and the additional four interviews conducted after the peer review. These changes were discussed with the peer reviewer to ensure proper coding and to protect against creep in the coding away from the original meanings of participants.

Peer debriefing.

The researcher engaged in peer debriefing activities with the same colleague who served as the peer reviewer. She brought unique expertise to this role, having served as a Coordinator of Special Education in a central Virginia school division and being acquainted with the raw data after reviewing the coding. Peer debriefing activities included reviewing the visual representation (Figure 1 in chapter 4) that summarized the major themes of the data and discussing each component illustrated in the graphic.

Both professionals agreed that the visual representation was accurate and

encapsulated the breadth and depth of the data in a meaningful way. These conclusions strengthen the validity of findings by helping ensure that researcher bias did not overly influence the interpretation of the data.

Limitations

Three major limitations may have threatened the validity of this study's findings: geographical constraints, the limited number of participants, and researcher bias.

Geographical constraints.

Geographical constraints played a role in participant recruitment, although these constraints were not as pronounced as outlined in the original study proposal. Only four school divisions from Superintendent's Region 1 were to have been included in the sample population from which participants would be drawn. However, because of the low number of responses to the recruitment email, the researcher had to extend her quest for participants into Regions 5 and 8. These three Regions encompass central Virginia. The researcher was limited to the central Virginia area because of time and traveling constraints. She was not able to travel more than two hours away from home or work to conduct interviews. If recruitment of participants could have been extended across the Commonwealth, the response numbers would probably have been higher across all school levels (elementary, middle, and high) and localities (rural, suburban, and urban). The geographical constraints related to using only school divisions in central Virginia certainly limit the findings from generalizability outside of Virginia. However, the main purpose of this study is to describe the VAAP participation decision-making process, not to project what may be occurring in other school divisions or states.

Limited number of participants.

One of the most disappointing limitations experienced in this study was the small number of case managers who responded to the recruitment email. As discussed earlier in this chapter, two phases of recruitment were required to produce 13 participants, five fewer than the 18 projected for the study. It was particularly troubling that only four participants were recruited from eight school divisions that agreed to participate in the second phase of recruitment.

One reason for the small number of responses may have been the timing of recruitment activities. The first phase of recruitment occurred in late April and early May. This is traditionally a busy time for special education teachers as they write IEPs for the following school year, complete end-of-year assessments for their students, and prepare final progress reports for parents. These issues and time constraints may have made case managers reluctant to take part in the study. However, the second phase of recruitment occurred in October. It was surprising that more case managers did not respond at this time of year.

Another reason for the poor recruitment results may have been teachers' heavy workloads. The superintendent for one school division approached to participate in the study declined because of the heavy workload already placed upon his teachers. Case managers may have felt overwhelmed by their current workload and unable to take on one more optional activity.

The findings from this study cannot be generalized because of the small number of case managers who participated. However, the themes that emerged from the data were strong and meaningful for most of the study participants. The results of this study

are valid and meaningful, although caution should be used in generalizing the finding beyond Virginia.

Researcher bias.

Researcher bias was also a limitation for this study. It is difficult for a qualitative researcher to be completely objective when analyzing interview data on a subject about which she has strong opinions. However, accepted techniques for reducing researcher bias were employed to minimize this threat to validity for the study. These techniques were discussed earlier and include member checking, peer debriefing, peer review, reflexive field notes and observations, mechanically recorded interviews, participant review of transcriptions, and use of participant language with verbatim accounts.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the decision-making process school Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams use to determine whether students with disabilities are eligible to participate in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). The objectives of this study were accomplished by conducting in-depth interviews with case managers implementing the VAAP with students who have significant intellectual disabilities. As described in chapter 3, the participants in this study were 13 VAAP case managers from rural, suburban, and urban school divisions in central Virginia, teaching in elementary, middle, and high schools. Their experience teaching students with significant intellectual disabilities varied from one to thirty years, and their experience implementing the VAAP ranged from one to ten years. Although the number of participants was low, their broad range of experiences and expertise provided rich data to answer the research questions. This information concerning participant's years of experience implementing the VAAP was not correlated with their responses during data analysis.

The job of the qualitative researcher is to organize and analyze the rich data collected from in-depth interviews into categories and themes, and to interpret those categories and themes to make sense of the raw data (Seidman, 2006). Seidman describes how the researcher employs an inductive process to organize meaningful threads of data into categories, using the participants' own words. Threads and

patterns are then connected within the categories into themes. The findings presented here represent the results of the researcher's analysis of interview data into categories and themes and a discussion of those results as they apply to the research questions and other significant issues related to the VAAP.

Research Question One

Who are the primary decision-makers for determining a student's participation in VAAP?

Case managers were asked explicitly to identify the primary decision-makers in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process. The *IEP team as decision-makers* was the theme to emerge from these data. Ten participants described the IEP team and/or named specific members of the IEP team (case managers, general education teachers, administrators, principals, parents, speech pathologists, etc.) as the decision-makers. One participant exemplified this sentiment: "The IEP team. And, that is, typically, case manager of the child, a general ed teacher, the parents, and the principal...So...we are the decision-makers." This view reflects the policy published in the VAAP implementation manual (VDOE, 2009b) and Participation Criteria Form (Appendix A) which state that the IEP team is responsible for making participation decisions for students who are candidates for the VAAP.

It is important to note that parents are participatory members of the IEP team, and during the interviews, some case managers specifically named parents as one of the decision-makers. However, a significant theme that emerged from the data described parents as *passive participants* in the VAAP decision-making process. Nine case managers described parents as follows: "the parents tend to be more passive;" "too trusting and just taking the word of the IEP team;" "A lot of times they just take our

word;” “We trust you whatever you decide.” Interestingly, two of the participants who specifically named parents as decision-makers, also described them as “passive” or “trusting.”

Research Questions Two and Three

What formal policies and informal practices inform the decision-making process? How do these formal policies and informal practices inform the decision-making process?

Research questions two and three will be discussed together because the data on these topics are closely linked. Formal policies and how those policies inform the decision-making process will be discussed first, followed by informal practices and their influence on the process.

Formal policies.

Participants described two formal policies. These formal policies were rooted in the typical cycle of IEP meetings and the use of the VAAP Participation Criteria Form (Appendix A) in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process. These two themes, entitled *IEP meetings* and *using the form*, are closely related because the form is embedded in the IEP as part of a section addressing a student’s participation in state assessments.

It is important to note that the VAAP Participation Criteria Form is one of the official forms used with the VAAP that the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) publishes on their web site. The annual cycle of IEP development is dictated by state and federal policy. These points suggest that case managers attempt to adhere to state policies when using the VAAP Participation Criteria Form during the annual IEP meeting to drive the VAAP eligibility decision-making process.

How the IEP meeting informs the decision-making process.

All but three study participants specifically mentioned the annual IEP meeting as the avenue for discussing a student's eligibility for the VAAP. State and federal guidelines require that a student's IEP be updated annually, so a student's VAAP eligibility status is, theoretically, evaluated annually, as well. This means the IEP meeting informs the decision-making process by prompting case managers and IEP teams to revisit a student's VAAP eligibility status as a part of the IEP cycle. This finding is not unexpected because VAAP eligibility is an IEP decision and IEPs are updated annually.

How the VAAP Participation Criteria Form informs the decision-making process.

The VAAP Participation Criteria Form informs the decision-making process by focusing the VAAP eligibility discussion during the student's IEP meeting. All but three study participants described using the "checklist," "form," or "criteria" in this way. One participant described how the "form" directs the VAAP eligibility decision-making process in her IEP meetings:

Well, we have this form that we print off of the IEP online that's automatically put into our IEPs...We print that off. We go over it as an IEP team. We decide, you know, "Do they meet this criteria?" If they do, then that helps us go in one direction. It's really...a great form because it takes you in one direction or the other. When you answer the questions you get to a certain point that, if you say, "no,"...you decide...VMAST, VGLA [both grade-level alternative assessment available to students with disabilities in

Virginia], or SOLs. But if you continue to answer, “yes,” then it only takes you one direction, which is VAAP. So, it’s based on those participation criteria...it’s really easy to follow. We just print it out, we go over it as a team, and then we take those directions.

Not all case managers described using the “form” or “criteria” with such earnestness, however. Four case managers talked somewhat casually about it. For example: “We pretty much just read it as we go and check ‘yes,’ check ‘yes,’ check...you know.” “And then, you have your criteria sheet there and you just get them to sign it. It’s not a big elaborate process. It’s just another sheet in the IEP.”

Informal Practices.

Study participants described many different informal practices they employ in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process, with several of the practices as individual as the participants themselves. However, one broad theme emerged regarding discussions or considerations that occurred before an IEP meeting. This theme was entitled *informal discussions*. Seven case managers described how they engaged in conversations with colleagues or parents about participation criteria or other student traits that might have a bearing on a student’s designation of significant intellectual disability in preparation for the IEP meeting. Consider this description offered by an elementary case manager, as she described how she might prepare to make the VAAP eligibility decision for one of her students:

Sometimes I will sit down (...) with the principal, or maybe a couple of the more experienced special ed teachers and be like, “I’m a little stumped here...How do you suggest we go about this, do you think?” And so,

sometimes they come and observe the child (...) so that they can help me make that decision. (...) I don't make it alone.

One middle school case manager described her electronic communications with a parent in preparation for a VAAP eligibility decision made at an IEP meeting the previous year:

His mother and I email back and forth quite a bit. (...) before I did his IEP last year, and we were planning the IEP meeting, and I said, "I think we should leave him on the VAAP because..." and I gave her my reasons. And she told me, "Yeah, I agree." So we discussed it and I gave her an option to say (...) rethink this, or can we retest, or can we do this, you know. In this case, she didn't because she's honest about her child.

Although this theme was not as tightly connected or as widely described as other themes that emerged from the data, it does illuminate the decision-making process in a unique way. It demonstrates that case managers prepare for VAAP eligibility discussions before the actual decision is made at the IEP meeting by consulting with parents and other professionals who know the child.

Research Question Four

What other factors influence the decision-making process?

Two additional themes emerged from the data that appear to influence the VAAP eligibility decision-making process. Both themes affect the decision-making process before the formal decision is reached at the IEP meeting. These themes are; (a) *students who have previously taken the VAAP will take it again*, and (b) *training, or the lack thereof*.

Students who have previously taken the VAAP will take it again.

A significant theme to emerge from the interview data revolved around students being found eligible to take the VAAP because they have done so previously. Nine participants described situations where, by the time the students got to them, they had taken the VAAP before and so, would continue to do so. This situation was described at all levels: high school, middle, and elementary. One high school case manager stated:

I haven't had a discussion as to (...) whether or not their student is or is not eligible. It's normally always been, "Your student is eligible to take the VAAP." This is the assessment that they take. You know, they've been taking it. They'll take it again.

A middle school teacher echoed the same attitude: "by the time they get to me, they've been doing the VAAP for a long time, and if they've met the criteria in the past, it's kind of assumed, as I get them, they'll meet the criteria now." Finally, but possibly of most interest, was an elementary teacher saying, "at my school, my building, it is usually, if a child has been taking it (...) forever (...) they're going to continue on to take it...that's just how it is there." This finding is significant on two levels. First, many students who take the VAAP have been appropriately identified to take the assessment, so continuing to find them eligible to participate is fitting. However, there exist a small number of students who are found eligible for and take the VAAP who may not have significant intellectual disabilities. If these students continue to be found eligible based on having done it in previous years, these students become victims of low expectations and are being *left behind* by our educational system. This is especially significant for the

student who was erroneously found eligible to take the VAAP in elementary school and each subsequent IEP team through high school perpetuates that poor decision, based on the fact the student took it before. This may be an extreme case, but the potential for this situation exists.

Training, or the lack thereof.

The inductive process of studying the data related to training took an interesting direction as the researcher looked for meaning related to the decision-making process. Twelve study participants stated they received training on implementing the VAAP with their students. Some training was informal between the case manager and an administrator, as described by this participant:

My director of special ed gave me a VAAP instructional binder...the VAAP instructional manual was printed off the Virginia state education website. So, [she] and I went through that together and, if there were any questions, she answered them.

Another case manager described training that was delivered over multiple sessions, specifically targeting how to complete the portfolio:

Our special ed director and student services director, they had training sessions at the school where I go. (...) one was a half-day training (...) where they showed us how to put it [the portfolio] together (...) this is what you want to collect, this is how you collect it, this is what to collect. Then, the next one was how to put it together, where to put the tags on the evidence, how to organize it.

While the training took different forms and happened under different circumstances, it was related to VAAP implementation.

Another, lesser, theme related to training was *sources of support*. Seven participants reported having support for implementing the VAAP from teachers and administrators within their school and across their school division. A case manager's comments encapsulate this theme:

You really have to work closely with your liaisons and people who have been doing it for a long time. (...) I worked really closely with a lot of other veteran special ed teachers to help teach me (...) what was good to use and what wasn't.

Another case manager described how she took advantage of expertise outside her school:

I spent several hours with a teacher from XXX school, who has been doing it forever, and she helped me (...) with reading curriculum that would help with VAAP assessment. She helped me (...) telling me what I should do, and what was good, and things that she uses. (...) I have a high school (...) teacher that I'm friends with who does an autism program. We meet frequently to (...) share ideas and share assessments and stuff...So I constantly have to network.

These themes illustrate that case managers felt they had sufficient training and support to implement the VAAP with their students.

However, expertise in implementing the VAAP does not necessarily translate into expertise in how to apply the VAAP participation criteria in the decision-making process.

Only one participant reported receiving training related specifically to VAAP eligibility. Although it is a single case, it has relevance to this issue. She described a two-day training she attended where "...part of the training was that we talked about what types of children would be eligible for doing the VAAP." One other participant described how VAAP eligibility was "...slightly touched upon in the trainings." The absence of VAAP eligibility as a training topic brings into question whether or not case managers interpret and apply the VAAP participation criteria accurately and consistently. It is beyond the scope of this study to infer the reason for this lack of training related to application of the VAAP participation criteria or the decision-making process.

Research Question Five

Could the decision-making process be improved upon? How and why?

Study participants were explicitly asked if they thought the VAAP eligibility decision-making process might be improved, how, and why. The data produced from these conversations about improving the VAAP eligibility decision-making process were so variable that categories and themes failed to emerge.

One explanation might be tied to the relative isolation of those teaching students with significant intellectual disabilities because the incidence of this disability is so low. While all study participants taught at neighborhood schools with other special education teachers, all but two indicated they were the only person in their school implementing the VAAP. This isolation might limit teachers' exposure to what other teachers and case managers of students with significant intellectual disabilities experience in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process, thereby limiting their understanding of what might be considered strengths and weaknesses in the decision-making process.

Essentially, if case managers do not know how case managers in other schools or school divisions are engaging in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process, how can they know how their process might be improved.

Not Appropriate

A final theme to emerge from the interview data encompassed case managers describing students who were taking the VAAP but were *not appropriate* for it. Seven study participants described these scenarios. In two cases, students came off the VAAP to take grade level assessments. In the remaining cases, those students continued to take the VAAP. This theme illustrates that students do get misidentified to take the VAAP, albeit a very small number of students.

First, consider the small number of students who take the VAAP – generally about 1% of the total student population. Then, consider the even smaller number of students who might be taking the VAAP who do not have significant intellectual disability. This would be a very small number of students, possibly, too few students to even worry about, from a statistical standpoint. However, for those individuals, the correct assessment decision is of utmost importance for their futures. A visual examination of VAAP participation rate data provided by the VDOE for the past six years revealed that about 1/3 of school divisions had VAAP participation rates at or below 1%, about 1/3 had VAAP participation rates between 1% and 1.5%, and about 1/3 had VAAP participation rates between 1.5 % and 3.7%. Based on the general prevalence of significant intellectual disabilities within the general population, around 1%, it is reasonable to conclude that most students found eligible to take the VAAP should be taking it. However, VAAP participation rates above 1.5% and up to 3.7%

seem to indicate that some students found eligible to participate in the VAAP do not meet the participation criteria. This assertion is supported by the data collected in this study.

It was interesting to hear case managers share stories about individual students who they thought might have been mislabeled or misplaced on the VAAP. There was an air of concern for these students, often coupled with a feeling of having few options by the time they got these students on their case loads. There was no question these case managers saw their students as individuals and wanted the best for them.

One case manager described what seemed to be a school division culture of students coming on and off alternate assessments on a regular basis. She stated, “There are many children that are switched at times, depending on their progress in class and new testing. (...) there are a lot of children that may have taken the VAAP previously, that are not taking the VAAP anymore.” Another case manager described an individual student. “I have had one where it was VAAP and switched him to VSEP. (...) I’m wondering why they didn’t do VGLA in middle school.” This is a fitting question to ask in this situation.

Other stories in this category described situations where case managers questioned the appropriateness of a student’s VAAP participation, but felt powerless to take the student off the VAAP. This situation was described at all levels: elementary, middle, and high. One elementary teacher recalled:

I’ve had students where I felt they probably shouldn’t take the VAAP.

Maybe it should be something else. But, a lot of times I don’t have control

over that (...) I have one who could possibly take the SOL. A lot of times, administrators don't like that.

A middle school teacher related this compelling story.

I've got one who came from another county. She's been in this county for two years (...) I almost think she's misdiagnosed. (...) That worries me because she has been (...) in this category [intellectual disability] (...) she (...) didn't get...pushed to do better. And, part of me wonders if she could do better (...) in a regular ed class...But then, at this point, like, I'm almost scared to say, "Oh good, you'll be in seventh grade next year. Let's pull you out of (...) the self-contained and throw you into this and hope that you can get up to grade level in (...) two year's time, so by the time you hit eighth grade, you'll be okay. And, that makes me feel a little trapped. It makes me feel a little sorry.

Finally, the perspective of a high school case manager:

I don't get what's going on at the middle school...I don't know what those discussions are or why they're making those decisions back then.

But...by the time they get to us, a lot of the damage has already been done. And, I know these kids are not being pushed hard enough in the middle school. They're absolutely not. (...) We're finding some that (...) are testing out of intellectual disabilities, and really, maybe...they could have gone on and done an SOL. Um...Now, I don't know (...) if they would have started that process back in middle school and pushed them harder back in middle school (...) [But] by the time we get them and

they're in 9th grade, and they haven't...taken all the other classes the other kids have, just suddenly dumped them in and put them on an SOL track, it probably would not be successful. (...) But, we see these kids now and we see some that might have had more potential, but were not pushed early on, then it's kind of disappointing.

These students, the ones who take the VAAP but possibly do not meet the criteria to participate, are victims of low expectations. However, it is not within the scope of this study to describe the outcomes for these students.

Although this theme does not specifically answer one of the five research questions it is related to the issues raised by them. The *parents as passive participants and training, or the lack thereof* themes that emerged with questions one and four, respectively, may offer some insight as to why some students with disabilities are found eligible to participate in the VAAP when they may not meet the participation criteria. If a student's parents do not actively participate in the decision-making process, then other factors that influence the eligibility decision, such as lack of training, may over-ride a parent's knowledge and expertise about their child and result in a student being inappropriately found eligible to take the VAAP. Likewise, if case managers are not properly trained to identify students with significant intellectual disabilities and/or apply the VAAP participation criteria, then students may be erroneously found eligible to participate in the VAAP, regardless of the level of parental participation.

Summary

The interview data collected and analyzed during this study resulted in the emergence of eight themes, namely: *IEP team as decision-makers; parents as passive participants; IEP meetings; using the form; informal discussions; students who have previously taken the VAAP will take it again; training, or the lack thereof; and not appropriate.* These themes answered all but one of the research questions and richly described the VAAP eligibility decision-making process for the 13 study participants.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The field of alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) has grown rapidly since AA-AAS were first mandated by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA 97). Since that time researchers have studied many facets of these assessments including: validity and content alignment (Elliott, Compton, & Roach, 2007; Flowers et al., 2006; Marion & Pellegrino, 2006; Roach, 2005; Roach et al., 2005; Spooner et al., 2006), learner characteristics of students participating in AA-AAS (Kearns et al., 2006; Kearns et al., 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al., 2009), teacher perceptions of AA (Flowers et al., 2005), and best practices for implementing AA-AAS (Browder et al., 2004; Browder et al., 2005; Karvonen & Huynh, 2007; Towles-Reeves, & Kleinert, 2006; Turner et al., 2000). This study, examining the decision-making process of finding students eligible to participate in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP), appears to have been the first of its kind. It sought to extend the existing research on AA-AAS by illuminating the eligibility decision-making process as a way to ensure that only those students with the most significant intellectual disabilities participate in these specialized assessments.

This study is important because it extends the current body of literature on AA-AAS by examining an issue that appears to have gone uninvestigated until

now. This study's use of qualitative methods to explore the VAAP eligibility decision-making process complements the existing descriptive literature on AA-AAS that previously examined teacher's perceptions of alternate assessments (Flowers, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Browder, & Spooner, 2005) and the learner characteristics of students participating in these specialized assessments (Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, & Kleinert, 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, & Kleinert, 2009). It also exemplifies the need to include parents, and other stakeholders, in AA-AAS research, as set forth by Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Muhomba (2009).

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Who are the primary decision-makers for determining a student's participation in VAAP?
2. What formal policies and informal practices inform the decision-making process?
3. How do these formal policies and informal practices influence the decision-making process?
4. What other factors influence the decision-making process?
5. Could the decision-making process be improved upon? How and why?

The in-depth interviews conducted during this study produced rich narrative data that were analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. The resultant themes that emerged from the data were used to answer the research questions and were discussed in Chapter 4. This chapter provides an interpretation of study findings, including a visual representation of the VAAP decision-making process, and a

discussion of the importance of the results. This chapter also includes recommendations for training and future research, and concludes with a discussion of limitations and how this study extended the current literature on AA-AAS.

Interpretation of Findings

Visual representations are one way qualitative researchers summarize their findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The themes that emerged from the analysis of interview data collected during this study illuminate the VAAP eligibility decision-making process in a unique way. These findings are encapsulated in the visual representation located in Figure 1. This model illustrates the issues and/or activities that occur before the IEP meeting that inform the VAAP eligibility decision-making process; the use of the VAAP Participation Criteria Form to guide the formal participation decision during the IEP meeting; and the outcomes of the decision made at the IEP meeting.

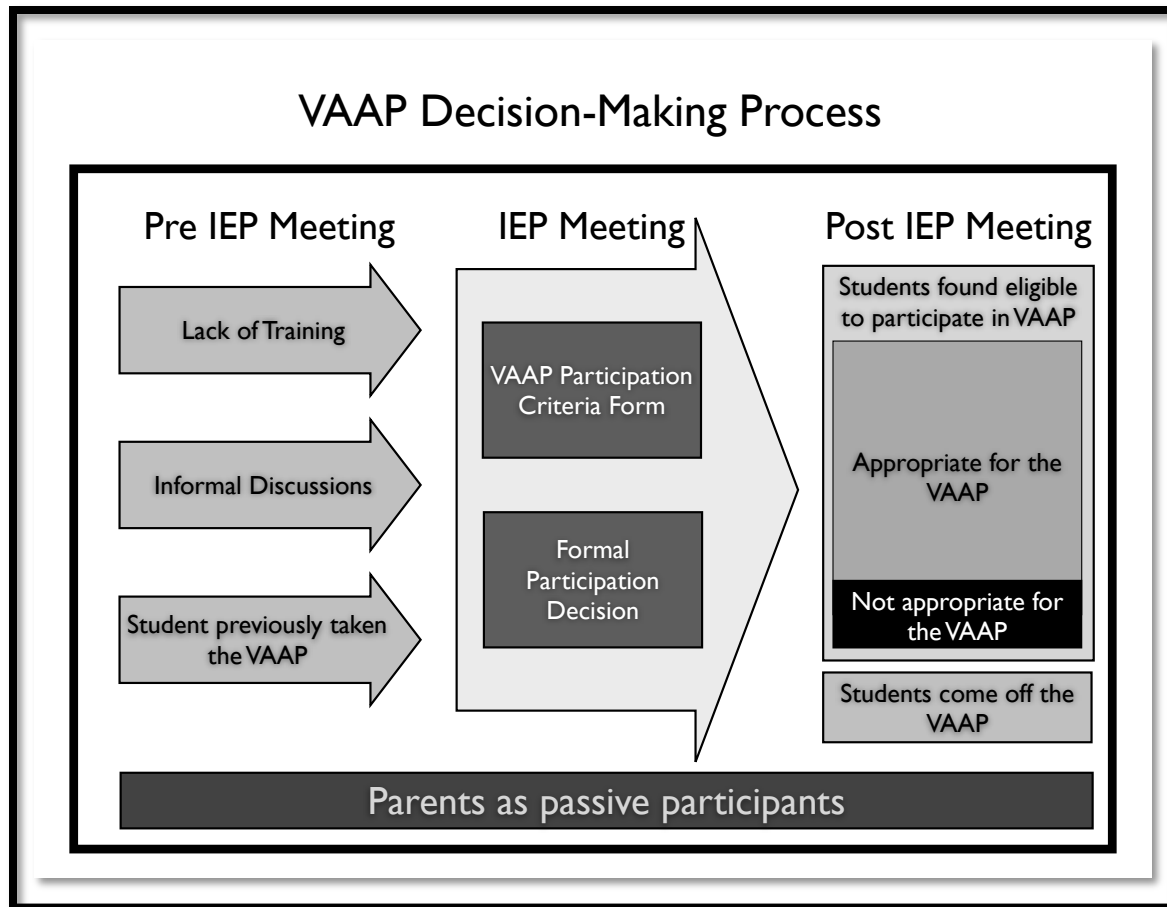


Figure 1: VAAP Decision-Making Process: A Visual Representation

The first section of the model is called *Pre IEP Meeting*. Three issues and/or activities inform the VAAP eligibility decision-making process before the formal decision is made at the IEP meeting. First, case managers and other IEP team members lack specific training related to application of the VAAP Participation Criteria Form and identifying students with significant intellectual disabilities. This issue links back to the problem discussed in chapter 2, i.e., that eligibility participation criteria for alternate assessments based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) are ambiguous and difficult to apply accurately and consistently during the eligibility decision-making process. Without proper

training on how to use the document and how to apply the criteria, case managers and IEP teams cannot be expected to always apply the participation criteria accurately. It is interesting to note that although one participant shared a copy of the *VDOE Guidance Document: Significant Cognitive Disabilities* (Appendix C), no study participants mentioned using it in their determination that a student had a significant intellectual disability. Therefore, lack of training related to identifying students with significant intellectual disabilities or how to accurately apply the VAAP participation criteria might influence the eligibility decision made by the IEP team.

Second, the informal discussions prior to the IEP meeting described by study participants seem to be a valuable component of the decision-making process. These informal discussions provide decision-makers with the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues and to use their colleagues as a sounding board for their deliberations about VAAP participation for their students. This professional discourse is important because it broadens the perspectives of the individual to include the expertise of colleagues and administrators.

The third issue that informs the VAAP participation decision-making process prior to the IEP meeting is the student's status of having previously taken the VAAP. This is not always a problem, because if a student was appropriately designated as having a significant intellectual disability, the IEP team can benefit from the expertise of former IEP teams and their decisions. However, if a student was erroneously placed on the VAAP and the current IEP team perpetuates that decision, the student becomes a victim of lowered

expectations and poor post-secondary outcomes. This issue was discussed in chapter 1 and is of genuine concern.

The center section of the model illustrates the *IEP meeting* and what occurs there. When members of the IEP team act as the primary decision-makers, they use the official VAAP Participation Criteria Form to guide their discussion to make the formal determination of a student's eligibility to participate in the VAAP.

The *Post IEP Meeting* section of the model shows the results of the VAAP eligibility decision made at the IEP meeting. Although the sizes of the boxes are not statistically based, they do represent that fact that most of the VAAP eligibility decisions made at the IEP meeting result in students being appropriately placed on the VAAP. There are a few instances of students being found eligible to participate in the VAAP who are not appropriate for the VAAP and a few others where students are taken off the VAAP to take other, grade level assessments.

Underlying the entire process is the fact that many case managers perceive *parents as passive participants* in the decision-making process. It is difficult to determine whether or not this influences the ultimate decision of the IEP team. It is simply a circumstance described by study participants. It would be interesting to hear parents' views about the VAAP eligibility decision-making process.

Importance of Findings

The findings from this study are important because they provide a model describing a critical decision in the educational career of a student with

intellectual disabilities. That decision is whether or not the student has a significant intellectual disability and will participate in the AA-AAS.

Chapter 2 raised questions about the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process over concerns that not all students taking AA-AAS actually have significant intellectual disabilities. A significant theme from the data included accounts of case managers describing students who were *not appropriate* for the VAAP. In some cases, these students were taken off the VAAP and went on to take grade level assessments. In other cases, these students stayed on the VAAP because the case manager felt the students would not be successful in grade level classes taking grade level assessments. As mentioned in chapter 4, the number of students in this situation is probably statistically insignificant. However, for students in this predicament the results are significant and can affect their academic instruction, post-secondary outcomes, and access to a free appropriate public education. It was not within the scope of this study to identify the number or percentage of students who are misidentified to take AA-AAS. It is sufficient to this argument to recognize that some students are misidentified.

The role of the IEP team in the AA-AAS decision-making process is to ensure the “right” students are found eligible to take these specialized assessments. Two other themes, *lack of training* and *students who have previously taken the VAAP will take it again*, may provide some insight as to why the “wrong” students are sometimes placed on the VAAP. First, if case managers and other decision-makers do not clearly understand the AA-AAS participation criteria and how to apply them, this could result in some students

being found eligible to take AA-AAS erroneously. Second, if students who have previously taken AA-AAS automatically continue to do so, then the small number of misidentified students will continue to be misidentified. Therefore, if AA-AAS participation decision-makers speciously apply participation criteria and subsequent decision-makers perpetuate that flawed decision, this may explain why the “wrong” students are sometimes found eligible to take AA-AAS.

Recommendations

Training recommendations.

Training decision-makers in understanding the characteristics of students with significant intellectual disabilities and properly applying participation criteria is one way to ensure the “right” students take AA-AAS. The diversity of students taking AA-AAS was described by Towles-Reeves, Kearns et al. (2009) and Kearns et al. (2011) and discussed in chapter two. It was argued that the *heterogeneity* of students with significant intellectual disabilities makes it difficult to establish a clear set of criteria to identify these students as appropriate participants in AA-AAS. Lack of guidance from federal and state education agencies regarding participation criteria was another issue discussed in chapter 2. It was argued that the lack of guidance from these agencies resulted in general participation criteria that were difficult for IEP teams to apply with consistency. Musson et al. (2010) clarify this issue by calling for “highly salient language” in AA-AAS participation guidelines. Evidence of these issues became apparent as the lack of training related to the application of VAAP participation criteria was identified in this study. The fact that study participants described

students who were “too high functioning” were taking the VAAP is also indicative of these issues. These points illustrate the need to train decision-makers in the application of AA-AAS participation criteria.

Training IEP teams.

Case managers and other members of the IEP team need training to better understand AA-AAS participation criteria and how to interpret them in the decision-making process. The training should address understanding and recognizing the student characteristics representative of significant intellectual disabilities. This would include, not just IQ score, but adaptive functioning and learner characteristics, as illustrated in the VDOE *Guidance Document: Significant Cognitive Disabilities* (Appendix C). Training for IEP team members should also specifically address understanding of the participation criteria and how to apply them to individual students. This would include instruction on how to discuss the participation criteria during IEP meetings. The objective is to have IEP teams interpret and apply the participation criteria accurately and consistently across school divisions and across the state.

IEP teams also need to receive training aimed at addressing the issue of *parents as passive participants* in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process. This training should include information to help IEP team members understand how to educate parents about the VAAP, the eligibility decision-making process, and the consequences of a student’s participation in the VAAP. It should also include training to help IEP team member empower parents to be active participants in this important decision.

Training administrators.

Training school administrators, including directors of testing, directors of special education, and school principals, on topics related to the identification of students with significant intellectual disabilities and application of AA-AAS participation criteria is warranted to insure proper oversight of the decision-making process. As mentioned in chapter 2, the VDOE does not appear to have a mechanism for monitoring the VAAP eligibility decisions made by IEP teams, nor is it within their charge to do so. However, school administrators are naturally a part of the IEP team and are in a position to ensure that IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria accurately and consistently. School administrators should be prepared to actively participate in the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process with understanding and expertise.

Training parents.

Although parents were considered *passive participants* in the VAAP eligibility decision-making process, they should be encouraged to actively participate in this decision about their children. The AA-AAS eligibility decision is especially important because it often dictates the type of diploma or certificate a student earns upon completing high school. One possible explanation for the poor participation of parents in the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process may be the dearth of knowledge and understanding of the participation criteria and how those criteria are applied. Educating parents about the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process may empower them to be more active in the

process. This would be an avenue for ensuring only the “right” students take AA-AAS.

Research recommendations.

Research examining the decision-making process of finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in AA-AAS was conspicuously absent from the literature. However, Roach (2005) discussed the importance of developing a meaningful framework for determining student eligibility for AA-AAS and ensuring IEP teams make informed decisions about student participation in these assessments. Kohl et al. (2006) judge eligibility criteria as a factor that can influence the technical quality of AA-AAS. Since participation criteria can influence the technical quality of AA-AAS and ensuring IEP teams make informed decisions about student participation is an important component of AA-AAS, this research study expanded the literature by describing the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process in Virginia. Further study of the AA-AAS decision-making process is needed to extend the body of knowledge important to the field of AA-AAS.

Understanding the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process from the case manager’s point of view has offered important insight into this complicated issue. However, case managers are not the sole decision-makers in this process. Parents, administrators, and other IEP team members also play an important role in the decision-making process. Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, and Muhomba (2009) suggest the need for AA-AAS research to include the perspectives of parents. This researcher suggests that the perspectives of other

stakeholders are of value, as well. Extending this research by examining how parents, administrators, and other IEP team members perceive the decision-making process would further illuminate the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process. This could be accomplished by replicating this study with other groups of stakeholders (parents, administrators, and other IEP team members) or by using focus groups of full IEP teams or other stakeholders (groups of parents, case managers, administrators, etc.). Both these types of qualitative research would broaden the findings of this study as a way to improve the decision-making process overall.

Another way of extending the findings from this study, and the subsequent model of the VAAP eligibility decision-making process, would be to use these findings to develop a survey reflecting the themes that emerged. A quantitative study surveying the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process would complement the findings of this study by allowing wider participation of case managers and other stakeholders. It would also permit a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings beyond case managers in central Virginia.

The lack of training related to identification of students with significant intellectual disabilities and the AA-AAS participation criteria was a significant finding. Research designed to identify the specific training needs of IEP teams on these issues would be beneficial to state and local policy makers and administrators. Research investigating the efficacy of training on the accurate identification of students with significant intellectual disabilities and their eligibility to participate in AA-AAS would help improve the AA-AAS decision-making

process. Both these avenues of research would help ensure that only those students with the most significant disabilities participate in AA-AAS.

Limitations

This study explored the decision-making process of determining eligibility for participation in AA-AAS. Although the researcher followed the methodology described in chapter 3, the limited scope of this study underscores the need to interpret the findings with caution. This study examined the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process for a single state and interviewed only 13 case managers from the central part of that state. The geographic restrictions and the limited number of participants make it difficult to generalize these findings to other regions in Virginia or other states in the nation. The VAAP Decision-Making Process model illustrated in Figure 1 in Chapter 4 is a representation of the decision-making process described by study participants and is not necessarily indicative of how case managers or IEP teams from other areas in Virginia or other states engage in the AA-AAS eligibility decision-making process. Nonetheless, these findings do have meaning for the broad field of AA-AAS and can help inform further research for the improvement of AA-AAS implementation for those students who take these specialized assessments.

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Appendix A

VAAP 2011-1210 Participation Criteria Form

Virginia Alternate Assessment Program

2011-2012 Participation Criteria

DIRECTIONS: To qualify for the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP), a student's IEP Team must determine that a student is eligible based on answering the questions below for each content area considered. A response of "No" for any question indicates that the student is NOT eligible for the VAAP.

Student Information

Student Name: _____ Date of Birth: _____

State Testing Identifier (STI): _____ Current Grade of Enrollment: _____

Diploma Program(s): _____

School Division Information

School Division Name: _____ School Name: _____

School Content Teacher: _____ Date: _____

Virginia Alternate Assessment Program Participation Criteria

- 1) Does the student have a current IEP or one that is being developed?
 Yes No
- 2) Does the student demonstrate significant cognitive disabilities?
 Yes No
- 3) Does the student's present level of performance indicate the need for extensive, direct instruction and/or intervention in a curriculum based on Aligned Standards of Learning? The present level of performance, or student evaluation, may also include personal management, recreation and leisure, school and community, vocational, communication, social competence and/or motor skills.
 Yes No
- 4) Does the student require intensive, frequent, and individualized instruction in a variety of settings to show interaction and achievement?
 Yes No
- 5) Is the student working toward educational goals other than those prescribed for a Modified Standard Diploma, Standard Diploma, or Advanced Studies Diploma?
 Yes No

NOTE: Students considered for the VAAP must be enrolled in a grade from 3 through 8 or high school.

Signed:

Special Education Teacher _____ Date _____

Parent _____ Date _____

Building Administrator or Designee _____ Date _____

Other _____ Date _____

VDOE (2011a)

Appendix B

LEAP Alternate Assessment Level 1 (LAA 1) Participation Criteria

LEAP Alternate Assessment Level 1, (LAA 1) Participation Criteria

Descriptors for the Participation Requirements for LAA 1

LEAP Alternate Assessment, Level 1 (LAA 1) was developed for students for whom there is evidence that the student is functioning three (3) or more standard deviations below the mean in cognitive functioning and/or adaptive behavior. Only students with **the most significant cognitive disabilities** are eligible to participate in LAA 1. A student with one of the following exceptionalities may be considered to have a significant cognitive disability or functions like a student with a significant cognitive disability: Mental Disability – moderate, Mental Disability – severe, Mental Disability – profound, and Multiple Disability. Students with other disabilities such as Autism, Traumatic Brain Injury, or Orthopedic Impairment may meet the LAA 1 Participation Criteria. The exceptionality Mental Disabilities - Mild does not meet the criteria for a significant cognitive disability.

IEP team members must use multiple sources of information to guide decision-making for statewide assessment selection purposes. The IEP team must review evidence that includes current IEP goals and objectives; results from formal and informal assessments which document academic achievement (e.g., curriculum-based assessments); and class performance records from at least the last two years.

The decision for a student to participate in LAA 1 must be made annually before LAA 1 assessment begins. Students who participate in LAA 1 are working toward a Certificate of Achievement and not the regular high school diploma.

The student has a disability that significantly impacts cognitive function and/or adaptive behavior.



There must be documentation on the IEP that the student is functioning three or more standard deviations below the mean in cognitive functioning and/or adaptive behavior.

The student requires extensive modified instruction aligned with the Louisiana Extended Standards to acquire, maintain, and generalize skills.



The IEP must reflect goals and objectives aligned with the Louisiana Extended Standards developed for students participating in LAA 1. The IEP may also contain IEP goals and objectives relating to other needs of the student which result from his or her disability, such as functional skills or social skills development.

The decision to include the student in LAA 1 is not solely based on the following safeguards.



This is a list of student safeguards that should prevent the student from being assessed in LAA 1 for reasons other than what the participation criteria has been established. The student has to be functioning three or more standard deviations below the mean in cognitive functioning and/or adaptive behavior. The placement of a student in LAA 1 shall not be an administrative decision to bypass the high stakes testing policy.

Appendix C

VDOE Guidance Document: Significant Cognitive Disabilities

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



GUIDANCE DOCUMENT: SIGNIFICANT COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

This document has been prepared in an effort to provide IEP teams with additional information by which to guide their decision making related to question two, “Does the student have a significant cognitive disability?” on the Virginia Alternate Assessment Participation (VAAP) Guidelines.

In making an assessment decision for a student to participate in the VAAP, teams must review and discuss a variety of sources of information, including psychological assessments, observations, achievement test data, and curricular content for evidence of a significant cognitive disability. Because reliance on Intelligence Quotient (IQ) scores alone is insufficient, IEP teams shall review all information available pertaining to the cognitive abilities of the student, including ability tests. The focal point for discussion needs to be on the impact of the cognitive disability.

A history of poor performance on state assessments and/or deficient reading scores does not qualify a student as having a significant cognitive disability. The group of students referred to in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* and the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* as having “significant cognitive disabilities” constitutes less than one percent of the student population. When examining incidence data, this one percent contains the following disability categories: moderate and severe intellectual disabilities, as a primary, secondary, and/or tertiary disability as well as classifications of multiple disabilities, autism, and Deaf-Blindness where intellectual disabilities are moderate and/or severe.

A number of organizations and associations have used various descriptors to define characteristics of students with significant cognitive disabilities. Please use the information below to help guide the discussion of whether or not a student has a significant cognitive disability. All the information below should be considered collectively and IEP teams should not rely solely on IQ scores. The following information represents what is traditionally found in the literature regarding the characteristics of children who have significant cognitive disabilities. IEP teams should review this information in making decisions for question number two of the VAAP participation guidelines: Does the student have significant cognitive disabilities?

AREA I: LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS

Students who are appropriately identified as participating in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program may exhibit some or all of the following characteristics:

1. Communication difficulties that affect self-determination, behavior, social interactions, and participation in multiple learning environments.
2. Uneven learning patterns in all domains including cognition, communication, socialization, and self-help.
3. Multiple disabling conditions concurrently with an intellectual disability , including physical disabilities, sensory challenges, and medical needs, that impact health, stamina, and engagement in learning tasks.
4. Motor impairments, in addition to cognitive/developmental delay, that makes participation in routine tasks challenging.
5. Difficulty learning new tasks, maintaining new skills, and generalizing skills to new environments.
6. Individualized methods of accessing information in alternative ways (tactile, visual, auditory, and multi-sensory).

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AREA II: ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) and the American Psychiatric Association have defined one component of having an intellectual disability as including at least two or more of the following impairments in adaptive behavior:

1. Communication
2. Self-care
3. Home living
4. Social/interpersonal skills
5. Use of community resources
6. Self-direction
7. Functional academic skills
8. Work
9. Leisure
10. Safety

Discussion :

Students with significant cognitive disabilities probably have difficulty both learning most or all of these skills and using or transferring the skills across different settings.

AND/OR:

****Performance on standardized adaptive behavior scales that is at least three standard deviations below the mean**

Example: The Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale has a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15 points. A score of 55 or below would indicate adaptive behavior functioning that is three standard deviations below the mean.

AREA III: INTELLECTUAL FUNCTIONING

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR outlines a range of IQ levels, ranging from mild to profound intellectual disabilities.

DSM-IV-TR	IQ Score Ranges	Discussion
Mild Intellectual Disability	IQ levels 50-55 to 70	The student might not be considered to have significant cognitive disabilities. Other factors should be considered such as impact from communication skills, sensory disabilities, and physical disabilities.
Moderate Intellectual Disability	IQ levels 35-40 to 50-55	**Performance on standardized intelligence tests that represent at least three standard deviations from the mean IQ score. These scores may indicate that a student has significant cognitive disabilities.
Severe Intellectual Disability	IQ level 20-25 to 35-40	
Profound Intellectual Disability	IQ level below 20-25	

****Note:** Section 200.1 in the Notice of Proposed Rule Making in the Federal Register on March 20, 2003 proposed defining "students with the most significant cognitive disabilities" as students with disabilities under the IDEA whose intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior are three or more standard deviations below the mean.

Appendix D

Sample Packet to School Divisions

Karren D. Streagle, M. Ed.
1657 Maidens Road
Maidens, VA 23102
804-869-4380 (cell)
Date

Superintendent
XXX County Public Schools
Address

Dear Superintendent:

I am a special education teacher in Goochland County Public Schools and doctoral student in the Department of Special Education and Disability Policy in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). My prospectus has been approved by my dissertation committee and I am in the process of preparing materials to submit to the VCU Institutional Review Board (IRB). I would like to include special educators from XXXX County Public Schools in my qualitative study of the decision-making process for finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). To that end, the following information is attached to this letter:

- Purpose of the study
- Research questions
- Study procedures
- Role of school division
- Introductory email to potential participants
- Consent form
- Interview protocols

If you have any questions or concerns after reviewing my materials, do not hesitate to contact me at the telephone number or email address found above. I look forward to

working with you and the special educators in XXXX. Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Karren D. Streagle

Enclosure

cc. Dr. Fred Orelove, Dissertation Chair

To VAAP or Not To VAAP? The Decision-Making Process of Identifying Students with
Significant Intellectual Disabilities Eligible for Participation in the Virginia Alternate
Assessment Program: A Proposal

Karren Streagle

Virginia Commonwealth University

August 21, 2011

Purpose

Alternate assessments based on academic achievement standards (AA-AAS) are intended to assess the academic achievement of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities, representing about 1% of the total student population. Students are considered to be appropriate participants in AA-AAS if they (a) have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or one is being developed; (b) have an intellectual disability; (c) require instruction in multiple settings or in multiple ways to generalize their learning; and (d) may also be participating in a curriculum that includes functional skills (Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, & Kleinert, 2009). These appropriate participants are identified by their IEP teams as having a significant intellectual disability and their IEP teams deem the AA-AAS to be a suitable way to assess their academic achievement. On the surface, it may appear easy to identify students with the most significant intellectual disabilities, for whom AA-AAS are intended. This is not the case, however, because the participation criteria can be subjective and do not simply distill down to an IQ score.

Ensuring IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria accurately and consistently, thereby allowing only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities to take AA-AAS, is essential to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities. Students who do not truly exhibit significant intellectual disabilities, but are relegated to taking AA-AAS are denied FAPE because their educational instruction and expectations are diminished. Students are taught what will be assessed. Students who truly have significant intellectual disabilities are affected when higher functioning students take AA-AAS because the technical quality of the

assessment is compromised. AA-AAS cut scores and proficiency scores are artificially inflated when students with less significant intellectual disabilities participate in the assessment. This decreases the sensitivity of the AA-AAS, thereby rendering the assessment tool incapable of accurately depicting the academic achievement of students with the most significant intellectual disabilities. Understanding how IEP teams apply AA-AAS participation criteria is an important step to ensuring that only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities take these specialized assessments.

The purpose of this proposed study is to examine the decision-making process whereby IEP teams determine a student's eligibility to participate in AA-AAS. Previous research in the field of AA-AAS has been descriptive (Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagel, 2006), focused on technical quality and validity (Elliott & Roach, 2007a, 2007b; Flowers, Browder, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006; Marion & Pellegrino, 2006; Roach, Elliott, & Webb, 2005; Spooner, Ahlgrim-Dezell, Kohprasert, Baker, & Courtade, 2008), or addressed learner characteristics of students participating in AA-AAS (Kearns, Towles-Reeves, Kleinert, Kleinert, & Thomas, 2011; Towles-Reeves, Kearns, Kleinert, & Kleinert., 2009). No studies to date have investigated how IEP teams apply participation criteria and make eligibility decisions for students with significant disabilities to participate in AA-AAS. Knowledge and understanding in this dimension of AA-AAS will enable federal, state, and local educational leaders to develop clearer criteria and policies surrounding the participation of students with significant intellectual disabilities in AA-AAS. Clearer participation criteria will, in turn, help ensure that only students with the most significant intellectual disabilities participate in AA-AAS, as intended.

Research Questions

This proposed study will be guided by the following research questions:

Who are the primary decision-makers for determining a student's participation in VAAP?

What formal policies and informal practices inform the decision-making process?

How do these formal policies and informal practices influence the decision-making process?

What other factors influence the decision-making process?

Could the decision-making process be improved upon? How and why?

Research Procedures

The researcher proposes to recruit XXXX County Public Schools special education teachers/case managers of students with significant intellectual disabilities who participate in the VAAP. Potential participants will be invited to participate in the study via email using the letter found in Appendix A.

The researcher will conduct two interviews with selected participants. Both interviews will be conducted within a two-week period, with interviews being scheduled with each participant at their convenience. Interviews will be conducted at locations mutually agreed up on the researcher and participant and may occur at the participant's school, the researcher's office, or other suitable location. Interviews will not be conducted during times that would interfere with student instruction. It is anticipated that all interviews will be concluded by November 1, 2011.

The first interview will last between 30 and 45 minutes and the interview guide can be found in Appendix B. It will begin with the business of discussing and gaining informed consent, confirming contact information between researcher and participant, and

establishing rapport. Before recording begins, participants may choose pseudonyms for themselves to use during the interviews to protect their identities. The recorded portion of the first interview will include the participants' responses to questions about their personal, educational, and professional backgrounds related to their current position as case manager and teacher for students with significant intellectual disabilities. The interview will conclude with a word of thanks from the researcher and the scheduling and/or confirming of the second interview. In preparation for the second interview, the researcher will ask participants to reflect on the VAAP participation decision-making process they and their IEP teams used and what the decision-making process means to them.

The second interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes and the interview guide can be found in Appendix C. It will begin with a few minutes of reviewing interview protocols and informed consent, and re-establishing rapport between the researcher and participant. The recorded portion of this interview will cover topics related specifically to the VAAP participation decision-making process, such as training, policies and procedures, interaction between IEP team members, and the meaning the participant associates with these issues. The participant will be invited to add any final insights at the conclusion of the interview.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher plans to keep observational records and field notes of all interviews. The researcher will also ask participants to share any supporting documents they received during training to prepare them to make participation decisions or to implement the VAAP.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

The researcher accepts the responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of all study participants, their students, and XXXX County Public Schools. Students, participants, and XXXX County Public Schools will NOT be identified by name in the research report or any subsequent publications. As stated above, the researcher will not conduct interviews during times that will interfere with student instruction or the execution of teachers' duties. The Informed Consent Form can be found in Appendix D. In addition to participant confidentiality, the Informed Consent Form includes language defining each participant as a volunteer. Participants may refrain from answering any questions with which they are uncomfortable and/or may withdraw from the study at any point, without threat of reprisal or retribution.

Role of School Division

Once permission has been granted by school division officials and the inclusion of the school division has been approved by the VCU Institutional Review Board (IRB), a representative of the school division will forward the recruitment email to teachers and case managers teaching students with significant intellectual disabilities. Once the email has been forwarded to teachers, the researcher will communicate directly with participants.

Research Results

The researcher hereby agrees to provide XXX County Public Schools and any participating teacher with a copy of the research results upon completion and acceptance of her dissertation.

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Appendix E

Research Subject Information and Consent Form

TITLE: The Decision-Making Process of Finding Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities Eligible for Participation in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program

VCU IRB NO.: 13577

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the study staff to explain any words that you do not clearly understand. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the decision-making process used by IEP teams when finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). The findings from this research study will be used by the researcher for her dissertation, as partial fulfillment of the requirements for her Ph.D. in Education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a special education teacher and/or case manager working with students with significant intellectual disabilities who have participated in the VAAP.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you.

In this study, you will be asked to participate in two semi-structured face-to-face interviews. During the first interview, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes, you will be asked to describe your background experience with the VAAP. For example: How long have you been involved with the VAAP? Tell me about your experience with implementing the VAAP with your students. What kind of training have you had related to the VAAP? The second interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes and include questions about how you and your IEP team make VAAP participation decisions for your students. For example: Tell me about how the VAAP decision-making process

works at your school. What formal policies do you follow when making VAAP participation decisions? What about any informal practices used in the decision-making process? Is there a difference between how you address VAAP eligibility for new VAAP students and those who have done it before? Both interviews will be scheduled within a two-week period. Interviews will be electronically recorded, but no names will be recorded. You will have the opportunity to review the transcribed interviews before the researcher analyzes them. At that time, you will have the opportunity to delete any passages you do not wish to be included in the study. You will be allowed to add to or clarify any statements included in your transcription. You will be asked to share any materials you have received during school-wide or division-wide VAAP implementation training.

Significant new findings developed during the course of the research, which may relate to your willingness to continue participation will be provided to you.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The researcher will ask in-depth questions that may cause you some discomfort. Some questions will ask about policies and procedure implemented at your school. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, and you may stop the interviews at any time.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS

You may not get any direct benefit from this study. However, the information learned from people in this study may help improve the policy and procedures for implementing the VAAP.

COSTS

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend participating in the interviews with the researcher and reviewing transcriptions.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive a Wal-mart \$10.00 gift certificate at the completion of the second interview as a token of appreciation for your time and participation.

ALTERNATIVES

You have the alternative to not participate in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of interview notes and recordings and any training materials you share with the researcher. Data are being collected for research purposes only. Verbatim wording from your interviews will be used in the reporting of findings for this study. However, personal identifying information (your name, school, or school division) will not appear in any written or published reports. Data collected through shared documents and interviews will be identified using participant numbers; for example, participant 1 or participant 2. Personal identifying information will be protected in two ways. Electronic files will be

password-protected and stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and storage device. Paper documents, such as researcher notes, training documents, and consent forms, will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's private home office. As mentioned earlier, interviews will be electronically recorded, but your name will not be included in the recording. Electronically recorded interviews will be stored as described above and securely erased from the researcher's computer once the researcher's dissertation has been approved. All remaining documents, including interview transcriptions, electronic files of analyzed interviews, training documents, consent forms, and researcher notes will be securely maintained (as described above) for five years after the study ends and will be destroyed (electronically erased from the researcher's computer or securely shredded) at that time. Access to all data will be limited to study personnel. A data safety-monitoring plan is established.

We will not tell anyone the answers you give us; however, information from the study and the consent form signed by you may be looked at or copied for research or legal purposes, or by Virginia Commonwealth University.

What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

QUESTIONS

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact Karren Streagle, doctoral student at VCU (804-869-4380, or streaglek@vcu.edu).

You may also contact:

Dr. Fred Orelove, Professor
Virginia Commonwealth University
P. O. Box 843020
Richmond, VA 23284-3020
Telephone: 804-828-3908
Email: forelove@vcu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research
Virginia Commonwealth University
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 113
P.O. Box 980568
Richmond, VA 23298

Telephone: 804-827-2157

You may also contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>.

CONSENT

I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.

Participant name printed

Participant signature

Date

Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent
Discussion /Witness (printed)

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent
Discussion/Witness

Date

Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)

Date

Appendix F

Interview Guide: Interview 1

This preliminary interview guide will be used during interview 1. Depending on the richness of responses provided by participants, the researcher may introduce additional questions to solicit responses relevant to the research study.

1. Tell me about your present job.
2. How long have you been teaching students with significant intellectual disabilities?
3. How long have you been involved with the VAAP?
4. How many students do you have taking VAAP this year?
5. How about in past years?
6. Tell me about your experience with implementing the VAAP with your students.
7. What kind of training have you had related to the VAAP?
8. What is your overall impression of the VAAP?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The interview will end with an explanation of what will be discussed at the second interview. Participants will be asked to consider the following topics for discussion at the second interview:

- Training and guidance for VAAP implementation and participation decision-making;
- Roles of IEP team members;
- VAAP participation decision-making processes; and
- The meaning VAAP implementation and participation decision-making has for you.

Participants will also be asked to bring any VAAP training or guidance materials with them to the second interview.

Appendix G

Interview Guide: Interview 2

This preliminary interview guide will be used during interview 2. Depending on the richness of responses provided by participants, the researcher may introduce additional questions to solicit responses relevant to the research study.

1. Before we move on to new topics today, is there anything you would like to add to what we discussed at the first interview?
2. Today we are going to talk about the decision-making process for identifying students with significant intellectual disabilities for VAAP participation. Tell me about the decision-making process works in your school
3. Who are the primary decision-makers in the process? (This question will not be asked if the participant explicitly includes this in his/her answer to the previous question.)
4. What formal policies do you follow when making VAAP participation decisions?
5. How did you learn about these formal policies?
6. What about any informal practices used in the decision-making process? (If needed: anything you do or consider that is not in the formal policies we just discussed.)
7. Can you explain how those work?
8. Is there a difference between how you address VAAP eligibility for new VAAP students and those who have done it before? Tell me about it.
9. How do you feel about the way your IEP team(s) applies the VAAP participation criteria?
10. What does the VAAP eligibility decision-making process mean to you?

11. Could the VAAP decision-making process be improved? How and why?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

The interview will end with a discussion of how participants will review interview transcripts. Participants will also have the opportunity to ask any questions about the study and their role in the study.

Appendix H

Introductory Email to Participants

Dear Special Education Teacher,

My name is Karren Streagle and I am a doctoral student and instructor at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I am seeking participants for my qualitative study on the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) and the decision-making processes used by IEP teams to find students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to take the VAAP, for my dissertation. I will be conducting in-depth interviews with study participants to gain a better understanding of this complex issue.

I would like to invite you to participate in this important study. Your expertise on the VAAP decision-making process and VAAP implementation will be invaluable to me as I research this issue. Taking part in this study will provide you an opportunity to share your experiences with the VAAP and to give your insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the VAAP eligibility process.

Study participants will be asked to take part in two in-depth interviews with me. The first interview will last between 30 and 45 minutes. The second interview will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview sessions will take place over a two-week period and will be scheduled at your convenience. Confidentiality of your identity will be strictly maintained. Once the study is completed I will share my findings with you.

If you are interested in being considered as a participant in this study, please reply to the email address or call me at the phone number listed below. Likewise, if you have any questions or concerns about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Karren D. Streagle, M.Ed.
Virginia Commonwealth University
1015 West Main Street
P.O. Box 2020
Richmond, VA 23284-2020
804-869-4380
streaglekd@vcu.edu

Appendix I

Signed Interview Transcription Confidentiality Agreement

Interview Transcription Confidentiality Agreement

TITLE: The Decision-Making Process of Finding Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities Eligible for Participation in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program

VCU IRB NO: HM13577

The purpose of this study is to investigate the decision-making process used by IEP teams when finding students with significant intellectual disabilities eligible to participate in the Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP). The findings from this research study will be used by the researcher for her dissertation, as partial fulfillment of the requirements for her Ph.D. in Education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

You will be transcribing recorded interviews between the researcher and study participants. The confidentiality of study participants must be strictly protected at all times. You are required to comply with the following security procedures:

- The information contained in all recordings and transcriptions **cannot be discussed** with any person, other than the researcher;
- Any personally identifiable information about study participants, including (but not limited to) name, school division, school, or names of students or colleagues, **will not be shared or discussed** with any person, other than the researcher;
- Once transcriptions have been electronically delivered to and confirmed by the researcher, you will **securely delete** any files from your computer;
- Once transcriptions have been electronically delivered to and confirmed by the researcher, you will **return cassette tapes** to the researcher;
- You **will not** copy cassette recordings or transcriptions; and
- You will **securely destroy** any printed or paper copies of transcriptions once transcriptions have been confirmed by the researcher.

By signing below, I indicate my understanding of and agreement to comply with all procedures described above. I also understand that I may contact the researcher with any questions or concerns I may have about my role as interview transcriber.

Diane Bennett _____ 6/13/11
Signature Date

Diane Bennett _____
Print name

Karen D. Streagle _____ 6/14/11
Researcher Signature Date

Karren D. Streagle
804-869-4380
streaglekd@vcu.edu

Vita

Karren Davis Streagle was born on August 14, 1963 in South Boston, Virginia and is an American citizen. She graduated from Huguenot High School, Richmond, Virginia in 1981. She received her Associates of Fine Arts degree in Music and Bachelor of Science degree in Child Development from Ferrum College, Ferrum, Virginia in 1983 and 1985, respectively. She taught preschool in the Dublin, Virginia area between 1986 and 1989. She earned a Master of Education degree in Early Childhood Special Education from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1995 and subsequently taught in Richmond Public Schools in Richmond, Virginia (1995-1999). She earned her special education endorsement in severe and profound disabilities in 2001 and taught students with significant intellectual disabilities in Goochland County Public Schools in Goochland, Virginia (1999-2006). In January 2006, she entered Virginia Commonwealth University to complete her Doctor of Philosophy in Education. She served as the Division Director of Testing for Goochland County Public Schools between 2006 and 2010. During the 2010-2011 school year, she served as a full-time collateral instructor in the Early Childhood Special Education Program in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. She currently teaches students with severe autism and significant intellectual disabilities in Goochland County Public Schools.